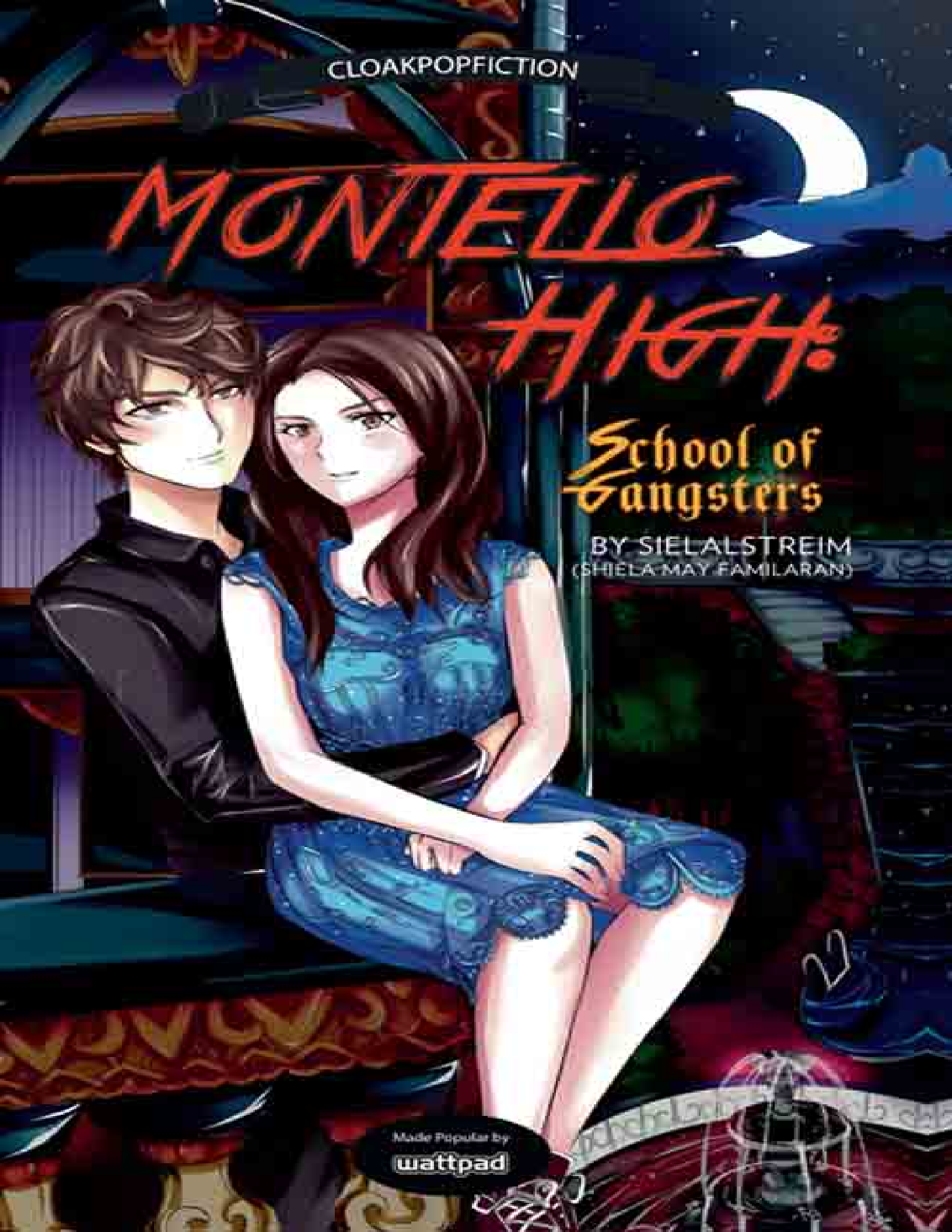
CLOAKPOPFICTION
MONTELLO HIGH:
School of Gangsters
BY SIELALSTREIM
(SHIELA MAY FAMILARAN)
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----------BOOK DETAILS----------

[BOOK NAME] Montello High: School of Gangsters [TOTALPARTS] 39

[BOOK DESCRIPTION] ----------

So you think you're bad? But surely, there are people out there more evil than you. Disgustingly gorgeous devils that are not meant to be messed with. Unless, you unfortunately dance on their hell of a territory.

Summer Leondale is always the badass kick-out girl. With her reputation, normal lang na magpalipat-lipat siya ng school. She walks in and bloody walks out. Until she entered Montello High… Hindi siya nag-iexpect na magiging madali ang lahat. And she was also not expecting that things will be shaken up by irresistibly hot and badass gangsters. Issues of Friendships, Love, Hatred, Violence and Mystery are her worst confrontations.

She walks in… will she be able to walk out?

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[1] Montello High: School of Gangsters

Chapter 1: School of Monsters

Montello High.

Sa lahat ng school na napasukan ko, ito na yata ang pinakamalaki, pinakamaganda at… well, pinakamalayo. Naubusan na yata ng list of schools sina Daddy kaya dito na nila ako pinadala. Ilang beses na ba akong na-kick-out? It was just my first month as a junior in high school pero heto at nasa ibang school na naman ako. And the twist? It's a boarding school. I've heard a lot of things about this Montello High, and it's not quite good.

Inihatid ako ng Principal sa building sa may kanang bahagi ng school. Ang main building ng Montello High ay napagigitnaan ng dalawa pang building: sa kaliwa ay dormitory para sa mga lalaki at sa kanan ang mga babae. Halata sa features ng school ang karangyaan ng mga estudyante. In my

case, I don’t know how Dad handled that. Dire-diretso kaming pumasok sa loob, walang bumati sa principal, ang ilang pumansin ay nagtaas lang ng kilay. Huminto kami sa isang pinto sa ikalawang palapag. Mas malaki pala ang loob nito kesa kung titingnan sa labas. Isang maganda, maputi at may mahabang buhok na babae ang nagbukas ng pinto at pinapasok kami.

“This is Summer Leondale, your new roommate,” sabi ng Principal.

“Hi. I’m Jamie!” Masayang bati ng nagbukas ng pinto.

“Mirden here!” Wika ng babae na nagbabasa sa kama. Merong tatlong kama sa maluwang na kwarto. Matapos ang ilang paalala ng Principal ay umalis na siya at dumiretso na ako sa bakanteng higaan na naka-puwesto sa dulong kaliwa. Sinimulan ko nang ayusin ang mga gamit ko.

“Kailangan mo ng tulong?” Tanong ni Jamie. Lumapit na rin si Mirden. Iniisip ko kung isa ba siyang nerd dahil sa suot niyang salamin at hawak na libro subalit nang tignan ko ang book cover…MANGA! At nagbabasa siya ng The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya. Whoa! I’m expecting Encyclopedia for that get up!

“Kaya ko na ‘to.” I am not really friendly and sociable. It’s Sunday and I’m used on spending it quietly. No people around. No noises. But I think it would be impossible starting this day. These girls seem nice… and I don’t like them.

“One month na simula nang mag-umpisa ang klase, bakit ngayon ka lang pumasok?” Kinuha ni Jamie ang isang libro na nilabas ko. “Bram Stoker’s Dracula? Nagbabasa ka nito?” Ang dami naman niyang tanong.

“Mabuti naman at napili mo ang Montello High,” naka-ngiting wika ni Mirden.

“Na-kick-out ako. At hindi ako pumili ng Montello,” I answerd coldly. Why? Why are they being so nice? Mali ba ang rumors tungkol sa school na ito?

“Na-kick-out? Bakit naman?” This Jamie girl would be a good paparazzi. Pero sige. Sasagutin ko na lang ang tanong niya.

“Because of sending nosy and stupid kids to our school clinic,” sagot ko at tiningnan ko sila ng matiim.

“Oh. Malapit nang mag-lunch. Bababa na kami, ah. Kung gusto mong sumabay cafeteria lang kami, ah.” Sabay na tumayo ang dalawa at lumakad sa pinto.

Umiiling na tinapos ko ang pag-aayos at pumunta sa cafeteria. Sa isang bukod na building na isa lang ang palapag at glass ang wall. Maaliwalas at maliwanag. Bumili ako ng single-sized pepperoni pizza at pepsi can at dumiretso sa isang bakanteng mesa.

May isang grupo ng mga lalaki at babae sa mahabang mesa sa likod ko at malakas silang nagtatawanan at nagkukuwentuhan. Ayoko talaga sa maiingay. Balak ko na sanang tumayo upang sumigaw ng ‘TAHIMIK!’ That’s what I usually do sa mga ganitong sitwasyon. Pero di ko na nagawa nang pumasok ang isa pang grupo at nabuo ang tensyon. Ang mga bagong dating, they had this excellent fashion taste of a gangster style. And I have to admit na guwapo sila. Pito sila samantalang mas madami ang mga nasa likod ko. Lumingon ako upang tingnan ang kabilang panig and yeah, may ibubuga rin ang ilang lalaking kasama nila pagdating sa hitsura.

Pero ano bang paki-alam ko? Eh, ano ngayon kung mas guwapo ang mga estudyante dito kumpara sa lahat ng school na napasukan ko? Pati na rin ang limang babae na kasama nila sa mesa, parehong magaganda at yeha, sexy. Ano ba naman ‘tong insecurities ko, kahit dito hindi ako tinatantanan!

Lumapit ang mga bagong dating sa direksyon namin. Nagtilian ang mga babae dahil sa dalawang nasa unahan ng grupo. Ang una ay may blonde na buhok, matangkad at chinito. Malakas ang dating niya at whoah, ang sexy niyang tingnan lalo na at seryoso siya. Ang isa naman ay kulay itim na messy in fashion ang buhok. Medyo mas bulky ang katawan niya kumpara sa chinito and I gotta say, he’s hot and sexy and good-looking. And then reality kicked in! Damn! Nasa gitna ako ng riot! Pero ano bang pakialam ko

sa kanila. I’m enjoying my pizza. Walang pakialam na ipinagpatuloy ko ang pagkain nang lumagpas sila sa mesa ko at tumigil sa likod.

“Wow. Magla-lunch dito ang Black Government!” Narinig kong sabi ng isang lalaki.

“Where’s Van Freniere?” Boses ng babae, malamang sa grupo ito ng nasa mesa.

“This is just a warning, Dark Monarch. Wag niyong hahawakan ang freshman. Hindi niyo gugustuhin na matikman ang galit ni Van.” Boses ng lalaki.

“Talaga, Makki? Hindi na ako makapaghintay. Oo nga pala, diba mahilig ka sa mga babae? Ba’t di ka na lang lumipat sa amin and you can have all these girls.”

Ano bang problema ng mga taong ito at bakit ganito ang usapan nila? Black government. Dark Monarch. Freshman. At mukhang may Women Trade pa. Uh. Now I know kung bakit may rumors na school of monsters ang Montello High.

“Hahaha. Talaga? Hindi ko sila type, eh. At wala akong balak na sumama sa mga talunang katulad niyo, Zach.” At mukhang nagsimula na ang riot dahil nakarinig ako ng mga daing at kalabog. Paglingon ko ay nakita ko kung gaano kalapit sa akin ang engkwentro. Nagchi-cheer ang limang babae na medyo umatras ng konti.

May isang lalaki na tumabig sa pizza ko… Wala na! Wala na ang lunch ko! Nang tumayo ako upang iwan ang lugar, isang lalaki ang humawak sa braso ko.

“Kasama ka ba ng Black Government? Ha?!” Galit na tanong niya. Masyadong mahigpit ang pagkakakapit niya. Huminga ako ng malalim.

“Hindi,” tipid kong sagot.

Ngumisi siya at tinangka niyang hilahin ako palapit sa kanya. Ang ayoko sa lahat ay ang kinakausap ako at hinahawakan ng kung sino! Hinampas ko ang lata ng soda sa mukha niya at nayupi iyon. Sunod ay tinadyakan ko siya sa parteng lubos niyang pagsisisihan.

“Agh!!!” Napaluhod siya at saka ko siya sinipa sa sahig at tinapakan ang mukha niya.

“AYOKO NANG GINUGULO AKO PAG KUMAKAIN!!!!!!” Sigaw ko sa kanya. Saka ko lang napansin na parang nag-pause ang paligid at lahat ng atensyon ay nasa akin. Uh. Ayoko rin ng masyadong atensyon.

“Who’s that bitch?” Galit na tanong ng isang lalaki. Mukhang ka-grupo ito ng mga nasa mesa dahil hindi ko matandaan na kasama ito ng mga bagong dating. Akala ko katapusan ko na pero muling nagpatuloy ang riot at may humila sa akin mula sa mga manunood. Sina Jamie at Mirden. Mabilis kaming tumakbo pabalik ng dorm.

“SUMMER!!! Ano sa tingin mo ang ginagawa mo?” Tanong ni Jamie. Nanlalaki ang mga mata niya at humihingal nang isarado niya ang pinto.

“Bakit ka nasa gitna ng gulo?!” Boses ni Mirden. Uh. Kailangan ba talagang sigawan nila ako? Isn’t it obvious that I was just having my oh-so-precious lunch? Which was ruined because of those jerks!

“Sana hindi ka nila namukhaan!” Mirden added.

“Gawd! She’s the new kid! Malamang ay madali nilang malalaman iyon!” Wika ni Jamie.

“Hey! What’s with the panic?” Nakakainis ang reaksyon nila. Aren’t they just overreacting? Eh, normal lang naman na ipagtanggol ang sarili mula sa mga sumira ng lunch mo diba? Seryoso nila akong pinagmasdan and, Gawd! They were pale because of… fear?

“Ang Black Government at Dark Monarch. Sila ang dalawang kinatatakutang gang group sa Montello High. O kahit sa labas ng school na

ito. At isang suicide kapag naka-bangga mo sila.” paliwanag ni Jamie. Uh! So I just bumped into evil gangsters?

“Yeah. Teen gangsters. Kalokohan lang yan. They’re just a bunch of idiots who thought it’s cool to threaten and punch people. But that’s totally lame and not so smart!” Sagot ko. Meron din namang mga gangsters sa school na napasukan ko, eh. We’re classmates on detention and always met up with the Councilors. These gangsters here? Cowards. They can’t even fight alone.

“They’re different than your ordinary gangsters!” Protesta ni Mirden.

“Yeah. They’re good-looking. But that doesn’t make them special.” Sagot ko at sinalpak ang earphones sa tainga ko. I don’t wanna hear any threatening info’s bout gangsters anymore. Hindi rin naman ako nag-iexpect na magiging maayos ang lahat, eh. At hindi rin naman ako magtatagal sa Montello. Magugulat na lang ako na kick-out na pala ulit ako.

Pero dapat siguro nakinig ako ng kahit papaano sa mga sinasabi sa akin nitong sina Mirden at Jaime.

[2] Chapter 2: Bloody Welcome Party

Chapter 2: The Bloody Welcome Party

Humihikab pa ako habang tinitingnan ang kakukuha ko pa lang na schedule. Kahit kailan talaga hindi ako maasahan sa paggising nang maaga. Nasa fifth floor ang una kong klase. English. I maybe a bad girl but I’m not a dumbass. Nagsisink-in naman sa utak ko yung mga pinipili kong marinig. What’s that? Selective Retention? Selective Attention? Uh! Too bad. Walang elevator para sa mga estudyante ang school na ito. Kung meron man, sa may faculty area lang. I gotta take the stairs… the hateful tiring stairs.

I pushed the door open the moment that I found my room number. I’m slightly nervous but it felt normal… another clichĂŠ. I’m a school hopper, remember?

“You must be the new kid. Introduce yourself to the class, please,” sabi ng teacher na nabungaran ko. Lahat ng atensyon ay nakatuon na sa akin. I really hate getting someone’s attention…or worse, everyone’s attention.

“Hi. I’m Summer Leondale,” tipid kong wika. Mukhang naghihintay sila ng susunod ko pang sasabihin. Pero naintindihan naman agad ng guro sa unahan na wala na akong balak dugtungan pa ang mahaba at meaningful kong pagpapakilala.

“I’m Mr. Daniel Flores, your English Instructor. You may take your seat, anywhere you want,” wika ng guro kong may katandaang lalaking may salamin at lumakad ako papunta sa may dulong bahagi.

I must say that Mr. Flores captured the interest of the students while teaching. He’s good at it, actually. Maayos ang takbo ng diskusyon nang marahas na bumukas ang pinto at pumasok ang limang estudyanteng lalaki. No! They’re the gorgeous gangsters from yesterday! Paano ko ba makakalimutan ang korning pangalan nila? Black Government. Duh! They could have used Puppeteers, Tomblrs, Fiery Glaciers, Blazing Dragons, Dark Fangs, Boys Generation, Wonder Boys, Super Juniors, Kattuns… Uh! Sorry for that! It’s kinda normal for me to make fun of high school gangs.

Pero ang nakakuha talaga ng atensyon ko ay ang lalaking nasa unahan nila. Hindi ko siya nakita kahapon. He got this messy, fashionable brown hair, matangkad, matangos na ilong, manipis at mamula-mulang labi and those eyes… mysterious brown eyes… and dang it! Kelan pa ba ako naging descriptive sa hitsura ng isang lalaki? Oh, well, okay. Ngayon. Tss.

“Freniere! Montreal! Sison! Lowe! West! For Heaven’s sake! You’re 45 minutes late!” Nagpipigil sa galit na wika ni Mr. Flores sa kanila. Whoah! He really looked scary! Kung siya ang naging teacher ko sa unang school na pinasukan ko, baka naging matino ako at hindi ako na-kick-out. Oh, well! That was a bad imagination on my part and I’m a terrible liar even with this.

“Wow. Para namang bago ka lang dito. Hindi ka pa ba masasanay?” Tanong ng lalaking bulky at itim ang buhok mula kahapon. Though I’m not really appreciative of guys, I can’t deny the obvious that he’s damn hot. He’s more

like an anime bishie with his hair and yeah, get up. Umupo sila sa bandang dulo. Kusang lumipat ng upuan ang mga nandoon para lang sa kanila. Weird. Anong meron sila para manipulahin ang paligid? Hindi na sumagot pa si Mr. Flores at itinuloy na ang naudlot na leksyon.

Hindi ko na sila naging kaklase pa, pero yung ilan mula kahapon ay namumukhaan ko sa ilang subjects. Whoah. For the first time naging invisible at normal ako, ah. I mean, nasanay na ko na pinagtatangkaang ma-bully, but it ends up na ako ang nanghaharas sa kanila. And then I wonder kung bakit ako naki-kick-out, there's nothing wrong with self defense…

It's already lunch time and I'm having pizza and coke on my tray, and well, chocolate bar and blueberry cheesecake. I'm heading to the far vacant table on the corner nang sinabayan ako nina Jamie at Mirden with their lunch trays.

"Malungkot kapag walang kasabay mag-lunch," nakangiting sabi ni Mirden.

I sighed. Mukha namang wala na akong magagawa para itaboy ang makukulit na 'to. Tahimik na lang akong nag-lunch habang nagkukuwentuhan yung dalawa. Minsan sinasagot ko ang tanong nila, pero wag kang magdiwang dahil hindi madalas ang minsan. And suddenly, tension embraced the cafeteria again. Ten gorgeous and hot members of Black Government came in, invading the center tables.

Ngayon lang ako nakakakita ng mga estudyanteng may kakayahang palayasin ang in-crowds sa center table. You know those bragging varsity players and cheerleaders. Oh, not palayasin at all, dahil mukhang kasamahan nila ang ilang varsities and some cheerleaders are trying to flirt with them… unsuccessfully. Particularly yung mukhang pinuno nila. Kahit super hot niyang tingnan to the nth level, mararamdaman mo sa aura niya na he's totally cold-hearted and arrogant.

"Remember them? Of course they are bound to be remembered… so that you won't mess with them," sabi ni Jamie nang mapansin niya kung nasaan ang paningin ko. Bago ko pa maibuhol ang dila ko, naitanong ko na ang nasa utak ko.

“Who’s that guy? Wala siya kahapon.” Gawd! Kailangang parusahan ang dilang ito. Tsk. Kelan pa ako naging interesado sa pangalan ng isang tao? O ng isang lalaki at that?

“He is Van Freniere. Ang leader ng Black Government. Wala siya kahapon dahil mukhang may kailangan siyang ayusin sa labas ng school. Curse that guy! His family is damn rich and forbiddenly powerful!” Sagot ni Mirden.

“So is Zach Martinia. The leader of Dark Monarch. Well, lahat naman ng mga pangunahing miyembro ng dalawang gang na yun, eh,” sabat ni Jamie.

“Mukhang walang Dark Monarch ngayon dito, ah. Balita ko kasi nabugbog nang sobra ang ilang miyembro nila kahapon. It’s obvious na mas nakakalamang ang Black Government kapag nangi-alam ang Mafia Boss ng mga Freniere. But then, si Van mismo ang nagbawal sa Mafia na manghimasok sa school.”

Muntik na akong masamid dahil sa nalaman ko kay Mirden. Mafia? Okay, I maybe a bad-ass freak pero hindi ako stupid para gumawa ng crazy stunt laban sa Mafia… But then, why should I be scared? Di ba nga hindi mangingialam ang Mafia?

Naghiwalay na kami nang mag-ring ang bell at naging normal at maayos ang mga sumunod na klase ko. The serene calmness before a terrible storm comes. Oh, well, this is only my starting day so medyo hindi pa visible ang mga signs na mai-expell ako.

Last Subject- P.E. I felt a slight relief nang malaman kong kaklase ko rin pala si Jamie… and a little fear nang maging kaklase ko ulit ang limang miyembro ng Black Government mula sa English class ko. They sure can manipulate their schedule para manatili silang magkakasama.

Girls are on black shorts and red shirts in this class. Boys are on black jogging pants and blue shirts. Montello seemed to love colors for their P.E. uniform. And ang nakakainis, those gangster kids were just happy on their gangster outfits and lazily slumped down on the bleachers.

Hindi sila naka-P.E. uniform at tila mga boss lang habang pinapanuod kami on our table tennis session. It’s quite unfair! And then a thought crossed my mind. Kung ang mga miyembro nga ng Black Government at Dark Monarch hindi nai-expell… ako pa kaya? E mas malala pa sila sa akin, a. Definitely not good! Napikon na ba sa akin si Daddy para itapon ako sa lugar na ito? Natapos ang calculation of situation ko nang maramdaman namin muli ang tension sa paligid. The Dark Monarch is heading this way. At ang P.E teacher…

“Ah… Kailangan ako ng Principal sa office!” Wika ng instructor at tumakbo. Dang it! Bakit parang under ng mga gangsters ang admin dito? Tumayo ang Black Government at humawi kaming mga estudyante sa gitna ng dalawang grupo. Everyone’s expecting a fight… and it will be a suicide to try to stop it.

“Easy Van! Hindi kayo ang ipinunta namin dito,” wika ng leader ng Dark Monarch, which I believe is Zach. He’s hot and gorgeous, too. Ugh! Ang hirap namang balewalain ng hitsura nila.

“You wanna learn table tennis, too?” The anime bishie asked with a smirk.

Nagulat na lang ako nang dalawang Dark Monarch ang humawak sa braso ko at kinaladkad ako palapit kay Zach.

“I already know how to play that boring game. But I wanna try it with the new kid,” sagot ni Zach.

Nakarinig ako ng mga gasps sa paligid ko. Even Jamie’s face was painted with concern.

“Let me go!” I gritted my teeth and tried to kick them with my legs. Uh. Masyado silang malakas! Darn it! Kinaladkad na nila ako palayo. Doom’s day! I’m so dead!

“Anong gagawin niyo sa kanya?” Lumingon ako sa nagsalita and it’s Chinito Blonde that’s talking. Another anime bishie! Zach laughed… evil laugh!

“Hindi mo naiintindihan? We’re going to play!” Sagot ni Zach. Masamang tingin lang ang tanging ibinibigay ng leader ng Black Government. Iiyak na ba ako? No! Natetense lang ako!!! I’m not that athletic but still, it doesn’t seem like have a choice. What game? What the hell would that game be?

“Dahil binugbog niya si Brent kahapon?” Tanong muli ni chinitong blonde. Now, he’s an angel for recognizing my bravery and awesomeness… But these devils grabbing me are unforgiving and scary! Darn! I can handle myself but not with this number of enemies…with not so nice reputation.

“Yeah! I remember her! Siya yung nagtantrums dahil nasira yung lunch niya!” The hot anime bishie said. Wow! Good details! Now I wanna be free!

Mukhang hindi iyon nakatulong, lumabas kasi na insult yun dahil binugbog ng isang babae ang miyembro nila. Tss! These screwed bastards! It’s not my fault if he’s weak and a loser!

“Time to play!” Galit na wika ni Zach at umalis na ang grupo. And because it’s my lucky day, kasama ako. Crap!

“ARGH!!!” That badly hurts! Nanunuod lang sina Zach habang tino-torture ako ng limang babaeng kasama nila. Those bitches from yesterday! Kaya kong basagin ang mukha nila kung hindi lang nakatali ang kamay ko! And that Brent! Brent with his funny bruised face! Sinikmuraan niya ako kanina. And these girls think that they overpowered me… the weaker me! I swear na hindi matatapos ang lifetime na ito nang hindi ako nakakaganti!

“She’s cute.” Napatingin silang lahat sa lalaking katabi ni Zach. He’s tall, handsome and with strong presence. Abot balikat ang kulay brown niyang buhok at… stop worshipping Monsters, Summer! Hindi mo ba nakikita na isa kang kawawang biktima? Now I’m thinking that I deserved that blow on my head.

“Argh! Damn!” I cursed habang napapadaing sa sakit dahil sa tadyak na natamo ko sa sikmura. I could taste the blood on my lips at ang sobrang pananakit ng buo kong katawan. If I survive this, magiging malala to mamayang gabi or bukas. Bakit ba kasi hindi na lang ako mag-faint like

those pathetic drama queens in movies whenever they got into something like this?

“Cute? We’re better than this loser!” Wika ng isa sa mga barbie bitch. I think siya yung sumipa sa akin kanina. How dare her!

“Hoy! Hindi ka ba sisigaw? Magmamakaawa? Hihingi ng tawad?” Galit na tanong ni Brent. No. I won’t give them the satisfaction. I licked the blood on the corner of my lips at tiningnan ko sila nang masama.

“She’s really tough. Let’s play the real game.” Lumapit si Zach sa direksyon ko at tinanggal ang tali sa kamay ko. “Don’t run. 10 minutes. Puwede mong labanan ang mga babaeng ito. But I’m telling you, they’re not the kind of girls who are afraid of breaking their fingernails. At magsurvive ka man o hindi, hahayaan ka na namin. Good luck!” At umalis na siya upang bumalik sa puwesto niya.

Limang babae ang nakapaligid sa akin ngayon. They’re taller than me… uh, or maybe I’m always just this small. And the worst thing is, I’m weak and tired and in pain dahil sa mga ginawa nila kanina. Oh! 10 minutes! Please badass side, be with me for 10 minutes.

And they lunged for me. I dodged the first punch at sinipa ko sa tiyan ang isa. I gave hard punches and kicks. Really, sanay akong i-defend ang sarili ko dahil palagi akong nakikipag-away sa old schools ko. Someone grabbed my neck and tried to choke me but I gave her a hard upper cut and caused her to passed out. One down.

May humila sa buhok ko. That’s not fair! Or maybe not. Babae nga pala sila at natural lang na sabunutan nila ako. I turned to the side at sinipa ko siya sa sikmura. Sa lakas nun, I’m sure hindi siya makakatayo. They made a wrong decision on making this game for me. I’m not a loser, weak girl, okay!

Three more! Medyo mahirap silang patumbahin dahil sabay-sabay sila sa pag-atake. At nararamdaman ko na rin ang pamamanhid ng binti ko. We gave punches and kicks. Hinila ko ang buhok ng isa sa mga babae, the blonde girl, at iniharang ang mukha niya sa suntok na paparating mula sa

isang kasamahan niya. It broke her nose and she passed out… dahil lang nagpanic siya nang makita niya ang dugo sa kamay niya.

Konti pa badass, Summer! Hinikayat ko ang sarili ko at buong lakas na tinalo ang dalawa! Great! I just decapacitated them all! But not this one pretty barbie who got a big piece of rock and ready to crack my head! Poor me! I was shocked and too weak to move now. They are monsters.

“TIME’S UP! GAME OVER!” Sigaw ng lalaki kanina who said that I was cute. How sweet of the time to save me.

“No! It’s not over yet!” Galit na sigaw ng barbie doll at tangkang itutuloy na sana ang pagbasag ng ulo ko. But Zach is swift enough to snapped her hands and push her away.

“Tanggapin mo nang natalo kayo, Cattleya o gusto mong ipakita ko sayo how much of a loser you are,” babala ni Zach. The girl called Cattleya glared at me.

“Bumalik na kayo sa mga dorm niyo!” Sigaw muli ni Zach at lahat sila ay sabay-sabay na umalis. Naiwan akong mag-isa sa medyo mapunong bahaging iyon ng Montello. Hinang-hina na ako kaya umupo ako at sumandal sa isa sa mga puno. Mabuti na lang naingatan ko ang mukha ko at tanging ang cut sa labi ko lang ang problema. Unlike sa buong katawan ko, kulang na lang malumpo ako. Of course, malabong ma-expell ako dito… dahil mukhang ito talaga ang tapunan ng mga kick-out. At hindi ko rin makukumbinsi si Daddy na alisin ako dito… mukha kasing we’re running out of schools na pwedeng lipatan.

Pero damn! It hurts like hell!

[3] Chapter 3: The Evil Prince

Chapter 3: The Evil Prince

The sun is finally setting down and it’s getting darker and darker here. Masyadong malawak ang Montello High… Malabong may makakita sa

akin dito. I even have to push myself up para makalakad papunta sa dorm. Pero sa ngayon, kailangan ko munang manatili doon at magpahinga.

Dang it! I just won their bad game but never had any gain. Curse them to the pits of hell! Uh. I'm still working on relaxing my breathing pattern. Tsk. Ramdam ko pa rin ang paninikmura nila sa akin. I closed my eyes hoping that it will help me endure the pain.

"How was the game?"

Iminulat ko ang aking mga mata sa boses na iyon ng isang lalaki. Mukha siyang pamilyar. Oh, of course. Paano ko ba makakalimutan ang almost perfect features ng mukha niya? Van of Black Government is standing in front of me.

"Deadly," tangi kong naisagot. I don't know how I became so pathetic that I suddenly wished na may plano siyang dalhin ako sa clinic or kahit sa dorm na lang. This pain was becoming unbearable. Hindi ba dapat namamanhid na ang buong katawan ko?

This Van guy, he was wearing a black leather jacket, red shirt and black jeans with large Vans shoes. And damn it! In this condition of mine, isinisigaw pa rin ng utak ko kung gaano kaguwapo ang nasa harap ko. He leaned down on me and placed a finger on my lips. I silently gasped when I saw my blood on his fingertips. Napahinto siya at tumingin sa mga puno at sa dumidilim na paligid. Isang buntong-hininga ang pinawalan niya at ilang saglit pa ay tumayo na siya saka nagsimulang humakbang palayo. Tila mas dumilim ang paligid kasabay ng pagkawala ng pag-asa kong maka-alis sa lugar na ito.

"T-Teka… Hindi mo ba…" Hindi ko na naituloy pa ang sasabihin ko. Seryoso ba siyang iiwan niya ako?

"I'm sure you can handle it," malamig niyang sabi at naglaho na siya sa paningin ko. Did he just get in here and vanished despite of seeing a person in need? Gawd! I can't believe this! He's a heartless, cold, stone, selfish and arrogant bastard! Gwapo nga siya pero ang layo ng hitsura niya sa ugali

niya! Oh, please, karma-baby, make him slip off the ground and break his neck! I curse him to death!!!

Just when I'm about to lose hope, someone carefully lifted me up. He's quite quick since hindi ko namalayan ang paglapit niya. Oh, even yung paglapit ng Van na yun kanina hindi ko naramdaman. What are they? Ninjas?

"Gusto mo bang idiretso kita sa clinic? " Tanong ng matangkad na lalaking nagbuhat sa akin. Nang matapat kami sa isa sa mga poste ng ilaw, muntik nang malaglag ang panga ko. The blonde chinito anime bishie!

"Sa dorm please," mahina kong sagot. Wow. It really felt comfortable being on his arm. Well, it was the most comfortable place at the moment. Whoah! Why did that sound wrong on so many levels? Sinabi ko sa kanya ang Room 217 at walang pag-aalinlangan na pumasok siya sa girl's dormitory. Lahat ng mga babae ay nakatingin sa kanya and yeah, nang may paghanga sa mga mata nila. There you go, Montello Heartthrob. Dumiretso siya sa second floor at kumatok sa room namin.

Halos lumuwa ang mata ni Mirden nang makita ako… at kulang na lang malaglag sa semento nang mapansin na buhat ako ng isa sa mga miyembro ng Black Government. Uh. Same reaction with Jamie na itinuro ang kama ko. Ilang minuto rin bago sila naka-get-over at tinulungan ako sa mga sugat at pasa ko.

"Oh my God! Summer, Are you okay?" Tanong ni Jamie. Anong klaseng tanong ba yun. Siyempre I'm not okay. It's damn obvious, right? Anlabo.

"Yeah. I'm fine. It's a little painful but I'll survive." Ngumiti ako sa kanila. Jamie and Mirden got this concerned faces. And the blonde chinito… uh, I must know his name. Pero sasagutin niya ba ko sa hitsura niyang sobrang seryoso?

"Hey, Blonde Chinito. Salamat," mahina kong sabi.

Napangiti siya ng kaunti. Siguro dahil sa ginamit kong nick name para sa kaniya. "No problem. Napadaan lang ako sa lugar na yun and I kinda

wanted to see the inside of this dorm," sagot niya. Wow. kung hindi pala siya napadaan doon at walang curiousity sa katawan, malamang nandoon pa rin ako sa liblib na lugar na yun hanggang ngayon.

"Ethan, ano bang nangyari? Nakita mo ba sina Zach na ginugulpi siya?" Tanong ni Mirden. She's currently putting ointments on my bruises and alcohol on my cuts. Kumuha naman ng pyjamas at t-shirt si Jamie sa closet ko.

So his name is Ethan. "Mag-isa lang siya sa Nightwoods," sagot niya. Sinubukan kong tumayo upang magbihis pero mukhang hindi sumasang-ayon sa akin ang mga binti ko.

"Dito ka na magbihis, Summer. Hey, Ethan! Tutal naman napagdesisyunan mong pumanig sa kabutihan at sundan ang liwanag ngayong gabi, pwede ka na rin bang maging isang anghel? Hindi pa kasi nagdi-dinner si Summer, eh." Wow. Well said, Jamie. Great usage of words.

"Sure." Sinong tatanggi sa mga sinabi ni Jamie? Lumabas na si Ethan sa kwarto at sinimulan ko nang magbihis. Narinig namin ang tilian ng mga babae sa labas. Ethan is making the bitches scream.

"Kyaaa! How does it feel to be on Ethan Montreal's arm?" Tanong ni Jamie at umupo sa kama ko. Ganun din ang ginawa ni Mirden na naghihintay ng sagot ko. Di ba dapat tinatanong nila kung anong nangyari sa akin? I'm already trying to slip into my pyjamas.

"Comfortable compared to the hard grassy ground," sagot ko. Finally! Naisuot ko din. Tinulungan na ako ni Mirden on my shirt, sabay silang napatigil at…

"Kyaaaa! Answerte mo!" Ano bang problema ng mga ito?

"Never--- as in never--- na nakikipag-usap ang mga miyembro ng Black Government ng hindi nila ka-member. Uh, siguro sa iba pero tipid na tipid lang. Si Miss President lang yata ang kinakausap nila, eh," wika ni Mirden.

“Dahil sa encounter mo with Ethan, mukhang masayang mabugbog sa Nightwoods.” Nightwoods. So that’s the torture place. Pero kung alam lang nila na si Van ang una kong nakita…

“Miss President?” Tanong ko. Sino nga pala siya?

“President ng Student Council. Trinity Domingo. The Perfect Girl,” sagot ni Mirden. So meron pa lang Student Council na nag-eexist dito. Honestly, I dont feel the need to have one. Mukha namang walang rules and regulations dito, eh.

Mahinang katok sa pintuan ang aming narinig. Agad iyong binuksan ni Jamie expecting a handsome Ethan Montreal on the doorway. But only to be disappointed dahil isa sa mga taga-dorm ang nandoon at iniabot ang dalang paperbag.

“Pinapaabot ni Ethan,” nakasimangot nitong sabi.

“Thanks, Cindy. It won’t kill to deliver a food, you know,” sagot ni Jamie.

“Yeah, right. Kung hindi lang niya sinabing papatayin niya ako kapag hindi ko ito naibigay agad,” sagot ng babae at umalis na.

Wow. Ang daming boxes and styrofoam sa loob ng malaking paperbag.

“Slices of Pizzas! Pasta! Caldereta! Madaming rice. Apple Pie. Box of Milk… He thought you’re a pig!” Komento ni Jamie habang ibinibigay sa akin ang baso ng tubig.

Seriously, mas mukhang pad ang malaking room na ito kesa sa dorm room. Merong kusina sa baba na may morning cereals, breads, chips and milk, chocolates, coffee and tea powder. At madaming couches at flat screen TVs. Pero hindi pa ako tumatambay sa first floor, nadadaanan ko lang kapag umaakyat ako ng kuwarto. Inilagay nila sa japanese style na mesa (I think it’s their study table) ang mga pagkain and they helped me towards it. Darn it! Gutom na ako. Tumakbo palabas ng room si Jamie at pagbalik niya, may dala siyang chips mula sa baba. Kumain kami nang sabay-sabay. Natotolerate ko na rin ang maiingay nilang kwentuhan. And their topic is

another torture. Crushes and the Black Government hotties. At mukhang nahilo na ata ako sa mga descriptive adjectives nila kaya nakatulugan ko na rin…

I'm on my hardest way to fifth floor! Gawd! Ansakit pa rin ng katawan ko and these stairs are torturing me. Good thing na kasabay ko ngayon sina Jamie at Mirden. I told them that I'm fine pero tinulungan pa rin nila ako. I hid my bandages by wearing black long sleeves. Unfortunately, the cut on my lower lip is still visible. Nagpaalam na sina MIrden at Jamie sa akin nang makarating kami sa tapat ng English Class ko. I received glances from my classmates while I'm walking towards the desk at the back. It's my second day but I already got their attention.

"Ano'ng nangyari kahapon?" Napalingon ako sa katabi ko. He's cute with nerd glasses and …a stranger.

"Welcome Party," sagot ko at isinandal ang ulo ko sa mesa. Magpapanggap na lang akong inaantok kaysa sagutin ang mga tanong nila. Maya-maya ay nakarinig ako ng tili ng mga babae sa labas at saka ang malakas na pagbukas ng pintuan ng classroom. Iniangat ko ang ulo ko at nakita si Ethan Montreal kasama ang leader nila na pinabayaan ako kagabi, at ang talo pang members ng Black Government. Mukhang mahilig sila sa dramatic at violent entrance.

"Okay ka na ba?" Nagulat ako nang magsalita si Ethan. Lumingon ako sa magkabilang side ko bago itinuro ang sarili ko.

"A-Ako?" Ha! I know, I looked stupid!

"You now this cute girl, Ethan?" Tss. Parang gusto kong ipamukha sa lalaking mukhang anime na yun na hindi ako bata para sa 'cute girl' description.

"Oo. Ano nga ulit ang pangalan mo?" Oh, well. Did he just say that he knew me?

"Summer Leondale," sagot ko.

“Natatandaan na kita! You were dragged by Zach kahapon! Sinaktan ka nila? They shouldn’t do that to a kid.” Wow! He’s a big mouth!

“May opinion ka pala, Makki,” umiiling na sabi ni Ethan. Napansin kong nakaupo na sa upuan nila yung leader at dalawa pa nilang kasama. Ilang desk lang sila on my left side. Mag-isa lang siya on his desk considering na dalawang chairs ang nandoon. I hate that guy!

Narinig ko ang mga bulungan at usapan sa paligid. Oh no! Kinakausap ako ng dalawang guwapo at hot na miyembro ng Black Government. Kaya pala ganun ang reaction nila.

“I’m Makki Sison, by the way. Nice meeting you, Summer.” And he winked. Dang it! He’s gorgeous. If ever I felt admiration for him, I hid it with my blank expression.

Hinawakan ni Ethan ang balikat ni Makki at itinulak papunta sa puwesto nila.

“Sige, Summer. Kailangan ko lang ilayo itong mokong na ito bago pa siya magkalat ng sinasabi niyang ‘charms’.” At dumiretso na sila sa mga kasama nila. Pumasok na rin sa classroom si Mr. Flores at tinuloy ang leksiyon na naputol kahapon.

Mabilis na lumipas ang oras and finally I’m done on my first two subjects. Meron pang Algebra for this morning and it’s on the third floor. Sa back stairs na lang ako dumaan since ayokong makipagsiksikan sa mga nagmamadaling estudyante sa main stairs.

“Akala ko hindi na kita makakausap nang solo.”

Tinig iyon ng isang babae. Agad kong ikinubli ang sarili ko sa wall kung saan madali kong nakikita ang mga nag-uusap nang hindi ako basta-basta mapapansin. I gasped at the scenario… They’re the perfect two! Si Van Freniere kausap ang isang almost perfect na babae. He still looked like the gorgeous and badass guy from a fiction book while the girl is a fairy… no, a princess, or maybe an angel. Halos malaglag ang panga ko nang halikan

nung angel-faced si Van… What to do? Babalik ba ako sa taas? Er! Napatigil ako sa pagpapanic ko nang itulak ni Van palayo yung babae.

“Van?” Confused niyang tanong.

“Stop it already, Trinity. Before I hurt you.” There was danger in his tone as he answered. She’s perfectly gorgeous! Tapos ganun lang niya itrato? Gawd! He’s impossibly numb!

“We can still have the past back,” she said pleadingly. Tears welling on her eyes. “You told me that you love me, right?”

Huminga nang malalim si Van. “Yes. I told you that. And I’m a liar.” And he gave such a mocking smile na kahit sino sigurong paglaanan nun ay maiinsulto o mao-offend. Halata sa mukha nung Trinity na nasaktan siya at tumakbo palayo. Wait. Trinity? That name sounds familiar.

...This is Goodbye cause we’re growing older… This forever in the words you never said….

Shit! Hindi ko nai-silent ang phone ko kaninang umaga and now, the Amber Pacific song is betraying the hell out of me.

...This is goodnight cause we’re growing colder…

Dang! Lumingon ang ulo ni Van sa direksyon kung nasaan ako…

I’M SO DEAD! AGAIN!

[4] Chapter 4: Nightwoods

Chapter 4: Nightwoods

Kinuha ko ang cellphone ko upang sagutin ito subalit bago ko pa mapindot ang answering key, may umagaw na nito sa akin at in-off. The devil! He’s gonna kill me! Uh!

“Ouch!” I cried as he grabbed my shoulders--- my bruised shoulders--- and pushed me to the wall. Nakaramdam ako ng takot nang magtama ang

paningin namin. Those dark eyes are menacingly looking back at me. Like a devil looking directly at the soul of his victim.

“Hindi ka magiging maswerte katulad ng inabot mo sa Dark Monarch,” galit na wika niya.

“Hindi ko naman sinasadya na mag-eavesdrop sa inyo. Dumadaan lang ako.” Pinigilan ko ang takot ko at sinalubong nang buong tapang ang tingin niya. Mas lalo siyang naging deadly looking--- if that’s even possible--- nang malaman niyang hindi ko siya uurungan.

“What the hell did you hear? And what did you see? Have you seen death? I’m willing to give you that!” Nagtatagis ang mga bagang na sabi niya.

“I’ve heard the words of a jerk! And I’ve seen an asshole hurting a girl’s feelings!” I snapped at him. Itinulak ko siya palayo. Whoa! His chest is broad, muscled and hard. Shut up! Summer! Stop being an idiot admiring this devil!

Mukhang hindi siya natitinag ng pagtulak ko. Jeez! Is he seriously gonna kill me now? Here at the backstairs? Mas sumasakit ang katawan ko dahil tina-try kong magpumiglas.

“Matapang ka para sagutin ako nang ganyan. Bago ka pa lang dito kaya may ipapayo ako sa’yo… DON’T EVER GO AGAINST MY WAY!”

“Hindi gumagana sa akin ang mga death threat,” sagot ko. Tinitigan niya ako nang matagal at tinanggal ang mga kamay niya sa balikat ko.

“Stay away if you still treasure your life,” wika niya at iniwan ako. Napaupo ako sa sahig at pinakawalan ang tensyon. Gawd! Did I just mess up with the two gang leaders? Uh! Mga pa-cool lang naman sila. Teenage gangs are nothing but childish brutes na feeling nila ay adults na sila! Uh! Bakit ba parang lume-level-up ang trouble sa buhay ko?

Kinalma ko muna ang sarili ko at saka ipinagpatuloy ang paglalakad papuntang cafeteria. Pagkakuha ko ng pasta at orange juice sa canteen ay

nagtungo nako sa bakanteng mesa. Nagulat ako nang may humila ng dalawang upuan sa harap at sa tabi ko.

“Wala kang gana ngayon, ah.” Umupo si Mirden at ibinigay sa akin ang isang mansanas. People! Gusto kong maglunch nang tahimik.

“Okay na ba yung mga pasa mo?” Tanong ni Jamie. Nagsimula na silang kumain kaya ganun na rin ang ginawa ko.

“Ano’ng meron kina Van at Trinity?” Diretsa kong tanong na ikinatulala nila. Ano bang mali sa tanong ko? I saw them kissing kanina so there must be something between the two of them, right? “What?” Tanong ko nang nakanganga pa rin sila sa akin.

“Ah, eh… Ba’t mo pala naitanong yan?” Tanong ni Jamie.

“I saw them kissing at the backstairs.” Mas lalong nagmukhang weird ang mga ekspresyon nila. Tss!

“Sila na ulit?” Gulat na bulalas ni Jamie.

“Kasi naging sila nung Grade 8 pa lang si Van at first year si Trinity. Hanggang sa pumasok din si Van sa Montello High. Pero nung naging sophomore na kami, nagbago na ang lahat at hindi na sila nakikitang magkasama. They broke up,” sabi ni Mirden.

Ganun pala ang nangyari. Mukhang gustong makipagbalikan ni Trinity kay Van and that guy is being a jerk. Information saved! And then I don’t care about it anymore. Tinapos ko na agad ang pagkain ko at dumiretso sa Algebra class. How I hate this class! At dahil sa hindi ko pa mapwersa ang katawan ko upang tumakbo papuntang 4th floor, medyo na-late na ako. And worse, bakit parang walang bakanteng upuan?

“You’re late, Miss Leondale,” wika ni Sir Gueco, the terror Math teacher. How did I know? My room mates are the worse information source.

Tumango lang ako kay Sir Gueco. I’m not good at apologizing kaya naghanap na lang ako ng bakanteng upuan. I saw Ethan Montreal, katabi

niya si Makki. Wow. Kaklase ko rin pala sila sa Algebra. Hindi sila pumasok sa klase na ‘to kahapon, ah! May nakita akong bakanteng silya sa likod nila… and for cheesecake’s sake, sa tabi ni Van. Of course, hindi ako puwedeng umupo doon.

“You’re disturbing the class by just standing there! Go! Sit beside Freniere!” The nerdy teacher shouted on me. I got no choice but to risk my life. Umupo ako sa tabi ni Van at nagpatuloy na si Sir Gueco sa pagdi-discuss. Saying my Algebra class is hateful is an understatement. How is it possible that it could get worse like this? For a seventeen year-old girl, surely I got enough trouble already! Right?

“You’ve got the nerve to sit there!” Said the dangerous and deep voice beside me. At nakita ko ang tila nagpipigil sa galit na si Van na nakatingin sa akin. I pushed my fear of him away and I smirked on him.

“It’s school’s property, devil!” Sagot ko at binuksan ang libro ko. Ethan and Makki just gave us glances as if they’re expecting some bloody scenes.

“No one answers me in that attitude, dumbass!”

Dumbass? Did he just call me that?! I glared at him. Sige. He wants my bitch side, I will give him bitch Summer!

“So, you liked the kiss, right? Liar?” I smirked again. Wow. Mukhang effective dahil nakita kong kumuyom ang kamao niya sa desk. Napansin ko rin na nag-stiff sina Ethan at Makki sa unahan namin. Lumingon si Ethan with a weird look on his face… Teka iniisip niya bang…

“Shut your f cking mouth!” Nangangalit ang mga bagang na sabi ni Van. Napikon na siya? See? He got the thinnest thread of patience.

“Why? You seemed to be enjoying it---”

“Shut up! Bitch!” Malakas niyang sinabi at ang atensyon ng lahat ay napunta sa amin. Gawd! He should just stop pestering me! I mean, he didn’t have to shout!

“I’m not a bitch! Devil!” Sagot ko. Nakakainis ang nilalang na ito! Akala ba niya uurungan ko siya?

“Mr. Freniere! Miss Leondale! You’re in the middle of my class!” Galit na wika ni Sir Gueco. Bumi-bingo na talaga ako. Tss. “Sue is two years older than Mary. Eleven years ago, Sue was twice as old as Mary. How old is each girl now? THE TWO OF YOU! SOLVE IT!” Sigaw ng teacher sa amin. I didn’t make a move. How would I know how to solve that? I’m not exactly best friends with numbers!

“I don’t care about their age. I got bigger problems than that,” I anwered coldly, sabay halukipkip ng braso ko. Gawd! Just expell me, okay? Para matapos na rin ‘tong kung anu-anong dinanas ko mula nang dumating ako sa Montello High School.

“Sue, the Freak, is 15 and the other bitch named Mary, is 13! And the stupid bitch beside me is 17, or 16, 0r 18. I don’t really care!” Galit na sagot ni Van. Huh! Imbento ka pa ng sagot!

“He’s right, Sir,” sabi ng isang estudyante. SERIOUSLY? What the---! Devil na marunong sa Mathematics?

“That’s correct, Freniere. But your harsh description doesn’t save the two of you from detention after your last subject,” wika ni Sir Gueco, still putting his pride up. I looked up at Van who seemed to be disappointed by the detention.

“Math Freak,” I murmured and he glared at me.

“Summer. Sabay tayong mag-dinner ni Mirden, ha,” wika ni Jamie habang nagbibihis kami sa girl’s locker room ng gym.

Medyo maayos na ang katawan ko at nakapagpatumba na ako ng mga classmates namin sa table tennis. As usual, the Black Government guys just watched us. In Van’s case, he just glared at me the whole time.

“Mauna na kayo. Pupunta pa ‘kong detention room,” wika ko sabay kuha ng bag ko.

Another couple of hours with the devil on detention room! Tsk.

Pinapasok ako ng bantay sa room, mukhang alam niyang black-listed ako, ah. And then the tension embraced me as I saw who's inside the room. Van is on the far side leaning on the wall with a cigarette on his mouth. Okay, fine! He looks hot like that! And the other two on the opposite wall glaring at him- Zach and the guy who told me that I was cute.

"Whoah! Hey, cute girl! You're really a badass, ha." And the guy with Zach winked at me. Tiningnan ko lang siya nang masama at umupo ako sa malapit na desk. So, where are the consequences? Lumapit sa akin yung kasama ni Zach.

"Hi. I'm Jin. Don't worry about the consequences. Matagal na silang sumuko sa paggawa nun dahil hindi naman effective," wika niya. So what's the sense of detention now? Nagagalit ako nang sobra! Bigla kong naalala ang ginawa nila kahapon. Dang it!

"Lumayo ka sa akin or I'll send you to the hottest pits of hell!" Galit kong sagot. He just laughed and that really pissed me off. Bago ko pa napigilan ang sarili ko, I punched him on his face, hitting hard on his jaw that made him fall on the floor. He looked at me wide-eyed. Shock was also apparent on the other two's faces. Then, Zach grabbed my arm. Wow! He's fast! And then the door burst open. Nagulat kaming lahat nang pumasok si Trinity. She's really perfectly beautiful.

"Bilang presidente ng Student Council, inuutusan kitang bitawan mo siya, Zach," seryoso niyang wika. Zach just smirked and pulled me closer to him, crashing me on his chest.

"Jerk!" Singhal ko. Lumapit si Trinity sa amin upang pigilan si Zach. No! Gorgeous! Sasaktan lang siya ni Zach. Bago pa siya makalapit ay naunahan na siya ni Van. Sh t! He's faster! He grabbed me from Zach and pushed him away. Susugod sana si Zach pero pinigilan siya ni Jin.

"Pare, wag muna. The cute girl is here, baka masaktan siya ulit." Cute girl? He's not referring to me, is he? He's referring to that angel-faced girl.

Trinity, ang president ng student council at ang babaeng kausap ni Van kaninang umaga.

“Still being protective, huh? I thought you’re a complete selfish bastard,” Zach snapped and his eyes lingered on my face. What the---?! Van is still grabbing my arm at mas humigpit iyon nang mapansin niyang nakatingin si Zach sa akin. I flinched dahil sa kapit niya. What’s with this devil? Balak niya bang balian ako ng braso?

“Ouch! Just let me go, okay?” Inis na sabi ko at binitiwan niya ako, sabay baling niya kay Trinity.

“What are you doing here? You know you should stay away from this room,” wika ni Van. So he’s just worried about her.

“I… I just wanted to know if you’re okay,” sagot ni Trinity. Wow! Martyr girl. Ikaiiling ko ba ang tagpong ito? Tss. Sa ganda niyang yan, maraming iba na mas karapat-dapat sa atensiyon niya. Bakit naman kaya nagpapaka-martir siya sa demonyong si Van?

“I’ll be more than fine if you leave now. Get out, Miss President. I have nothing to do with you.” At sumandal na ulit si Van sa dingding, pulling another cigarette. Insensitive jerk! Trinity just nodded and walked out the room.

We stayed quiet for more than an hour. Jin is smiling at me while Zach is just giving me few glances and glares for Van. That jerk, meanwhile, is just busy on filling the room with smoke. Jeez!

“I’ll make you suffer dahil sa pagtulak mo sa akin kanina,” sa wakas ay wika ni Zach. HIndi siguro siya marunong magkontrol.

“Kung gusto mong gumanti, bring your gang and catch me in surprise. Doon ka lang magkakaroon ng chance na manalo,” sagot ni Van. Tss.

Why don’t you just stab each other’s chest? I would be more than happy to witness that. Nung sinabi ng bantay na puwede na kaming umalis, agad akong tumakbo palabas. Madilim na rin pala at konti na lang ang tao sa

school. I ran to my locker quickly and get a notebook. And I ran on my way to the dorm. Hindi pa ako nakakalayo nang makita ko sina Cattleya at ang isa sa mga kasama niya. These bitches who beat the hell out of me last night! Bumalik ang galit sa dibdib ko and I'm now looking for revenge. Don't get mad, get even, right? But fortunately, I'm up on doing both. Mabilis kong tinakbo ang pagitan namin. I have to be proud of myself since I know I'm a good runner. Wala na akong kontrol sa sarili ko, alam kong nilamon na ako ng galit ko.

"Wanna play again?" Sabi ko nang ilang hakbang na lang ang lapit ko sa kanila. Sabay silang lumingon at binigyan ako ng nakakainis na ngiti.

"Trixie, let's beat the hell out of this bitch!" Inis na sabi ni Cattleya sa kasama niya and they both attacked me.

Wrong move. Ngayong nasa kondisyon ako, it's time for my sweet revenge! At sunud-sunod ang paglipad ng kamao ko sa mukha nila. I'm smaller compared to them but I'm stronger than these barbie dolls. Unang sumuko si Trixie at tumakbo palayo. Oh, yeah! This weird school can't control all students about this kind of violence. It's like a normal thing here. Rude Management, pero advantage ko yun ngayon.

Sinipa ko nang maraming beses si Cattleya. Galit na galit talaga ako! I was about to kick her again when someone grabbed my arm and pulled me away from her. Sinamantala iyon ni Cattleya at gumapang na tumakbo palayo. Nilingon ko ang paki-elamerong may hawak ng braso ko. Makakatikim 'tong gagong ito sa akin, eh.

"Mapapalampas ng school na ito ang pambubugbog pero hindi mo gugustuhin ang gagawin nilang hakbang kapag nakapatay ka ng kapwa mo estudyante." The hell with this brown-eyed-perfect creature! Gusto niya talagang maramdaman ang galit ko, ha!

"Bitawan mo ko!" At sinipa ko siya sa binti niya upang ma-off balance siya. Subalit hindi man lang siya natinag at mas hinigpitan niya ang hawak niya sa braso ko.

“Bibitiwan kita pero ipangako mong hindi mo na babanggitin ang tungkol sa nangyari sa amin ni Trinity,” malamig niyang sabi. Walang emosyon. Uh? That thing? I calmed myself and controlled my anger again.

“I don’t make promises. Why, Van? Don’t you want them to know how romantic you are?” I managed a smirk that made his face darker. To my surprise, he pulled me to him, smashing me on his hard chest. There are only a few inches between our faces and I could feel his sweet and warm breath on my skin. Nakaramdam ako ng pagpapanic at ang nakakainis na pag-init ng pisngi ko. I’m sure as hell that I’m blushing!

“I can kill you and destroy the school,” bulong niya. Okay! So much for the blushing while receiving a death threat. I smirked at inilapit ko pa ng isang pulgada ang mukha ko sa kanya. He’s so damn tall so I tip-toed and said,

“But I love Death with a passion and I can always give it to you.”

He snaked his arm around my waist and I gasped as he pulled me closer. Damn! This is not-so-action-packed-war. Isang inch na lang yata ang pagitan ng mukha namin, and I’m so not giving up on this game! I always win!

“Yeah? Let’s exchange death, then. How do you want to die?” He smirked. Jeez! He’s friggin’ hot and his whispering husky voice is sexy! Uh! I should not lose my composure with this jerk! He wants death with an artistic touch, ha? Inilagay ko ang kaliwang kamay ko sa pisngi niya at inilakbay ang daliri ko sa kanyang panga.

“No. I’m not the one who’s gonna die. But you’ll surely have the sweetest death.” I smiled… seductively. First time kong gumawa ng ganitong stunt. Kailangan kong parusahan ang sarili ko mamaya. Mukha namang effective dahil tila mas naging dark pa ang mga mata niya. Those beautiful eyes piercing on mine…

“Can I taste how sweet it is now?” He asked while gazing on my lips. Bumilis ang tibok ng puso ko at itinulak ko ang dibdib niya palayo. Lumuwag ang kapit niya sa akin pero hindi niya pa rin ako binibitawan.

“Di pa kita papatayin ngayon, Van Freniere. Dahil naka-schedule sa Death List ko ngayon ang dalawang babaeng kasama ko kanina. So if you don’t mind, kailangan ko nang mag-dinner sa cafeteria na mukhang dining hall.” Gawd! I’m stupid! I’m blushing! I know I’m blushing! At binitiwan niya ako. Nararamdaman ko pa ring nakatingin siya habang naglalakad ako palayo. Damn! That was too close!

Nakita ko sina Jamie at Mirden sa dining hall-slash-cafeteria at kumaway sila sa akin. I grabbed some pasta, rice, meatballs and pepsi at binayaran sa counter saka pumunta sa table nila. I’m still tensed dahil sa nangyari kanina but I’m trying to shrug it off.

“Kamusta ang detention? Nag-alala kami sa’yo dahil walang gustong makaranas ng detention dito. Alam mo yun, hindi friendly ang makakasama sa loob,” sabi ni Jamie.

“Yeah, it’s so unfriendly and uncomfortable. Bakit ba kasi hindi na lang nila ako i-expell!” Inis na sabi ko. Medyo nalungkot naman ang mukha ng dalawa.

“Gusto mo ba talagang umalis sa Montello High?” Tanong ni Mirden. Behind her weird glasses, alam kong nag-aalala siya sa isasagot ko. I hate to break these girls’ hearts pero…

“Oo,” tipid kong sagot at tahimik na kumain.

“Pero hindi mo ba gusto na maging kaibigan kami?” Malungkot na tanong ni Jamie.

“Friends? Nagpapatawa ba kayo? Hindi ko kailangan ng kaibigan.” Er! I’m breaking their hearts. Urgh! Pero siguro naman hindi sila seryoso sa mga sinasabi nila. Ilang araw lang nila ako kilala at wala akong natatandaang time na naging mabuti ako sa kanila. Tinapos ko agad ang pagkain ko at iniwan sila. Gusto ko nang magpahinga sa dorm. Nakakapagod ang mga pangyayari sa araw na ito. And that Devil, Van! Kailangan ko ng plano para mapakita sa kanya na hindi ako basta-basta titiklop sa kanya.

Nagising ako sa ingay sa paligid. May tunog ng sirena at mga sigawan at takbuhan. “Ano’ng nangyayari?” Tanong ko kina Jamie.

“May nasusunog na kwarto sa boy’s dorm! Sumama ka sa amin. Puntahan natin,” sagot niya.

Bumangon ako at nagsuot ng sweater. Wala na akong time para magpantalon at ayusin ang sarili ko. So with my short shorts and messy brown hair, tumakbo kami across the lawn at humalo sa madaming estudyante sa tapat ng boy’s dorm. Nakita ko din ang mga miyembro ng Black Government at Dark Monarch. Mga bored at sleepy reaction kahit may sunog? What the hell? May nakita akong gumagalaw sa medyo madilim na gilid ng dorm. Iniwan ko sina Mirden at tumakbo papunta roon. Nang makita niya na palapit ako sa kanya, tumakbo siya palayo. Shit! He’s too fast! Nasa gitna ako ng Nightwoods nang mapagpasyahan kong tumigil. Crap! May alam siya sa sunog! Bakit ko nga ba siya hinahabol? Dahil curious ako? Uh! Hindi na talaga ako natuto na palagi akong napapahamak kapag bini-baby ko ang curiousity ko.

And then someone dragged me and pulled me behind a tree. Tumingala ako sa kanya at napamaang.

“J-Jin… ano bang---” Tinakpan niya ng kamay ang bibig ko and pinned me to the tree.

“Shh…” wika niya habang inilalakbay niya ang mga mata sa paligid. Sinundan ko ng tingin ang tinitingnan niya at nakita ko sa may di kalayuan ang dalawang lalaki na naka-tuxedo at may maskara sa mukha. As in yung maskara nila yung ginagamit sa masquerade ball. Mukha silang disente at normal naman kung hindi lang pareho silang may hawak na baril. So ang normal kong reaksyon ay matakot. Kahit na ako ang pinaka-badass at pinakamalakas na estudyante ng Montello High, wala pa ring laban ang katawan ko kung tataniman nila ako ng bala. I know I became pale at napahawak ako sa braso ni Jin.

At ano ba ang ginagawa ng lalaking ito dito? But whatever the reason is, mas gugustuhin ko pang makasama siya kesa makaharap ang mga- ano pala sila? Assassins? Agents? Hinawakan ni Jin ang nanlalamig kong kamay and

he looked at me with concern. Biruin mo, may ganung ekspresyon din pala sa sistema niya. Nang masiguro ng dalawang estranghero na walang tao sa paligid, agad silang umalis.

“Sundan natin sila,” sabi ko nang mawala ang kamay ni Jin sa bibig ko.

“Are you crazy? They’ve got guns! At isa pa malamang na hindi na natin sila maabutan. May daan sa Nightwoods palabas ng school,” sagot niya.

“Uh, J-Jin…” Ano ba ‘tong taong ito? Wala ba siyang pakiramdam?

“Yeah?” Tanong niya.

“Puwede bang lumayo ka nang konti?” Ha! Nasa puno pa rin kasi kami. He laughed.

“Yeah. Sorry.” At lumayo siya nang konti pero hindi niya pa rin binibitawan ang kamay ko. Nang sinubukan kong bawiin, mas hinigpitan lang niya ang kapit.

“Can I just hold your hand until makapunta tayo sa Principal’s office at ipaalam ito?” What the hell? Why is he acting that way? Pero naisip ko na nagamit ko rin naman siya as comfort kanina nung matakot ako. And he just saved me, I guess? Dahil kung hindi dahil sa kanya baka nakita na ako ng mga gunmen na iyon. I just nodded at naglakad na kami pabalik. Marami pa ring estudyante sa labas ng boy’s dorm kahit humupa na ang apoy. Umalis na rin ang mga bumbero at isang police car na lang ang nakatigil doon.

“Jin!” Sabay kaming lumingon sa tumawag at nakita namin si Zach kasama ang ilang miyembro ng Dark Monarch. Nawala ang bored expression sa mukha niya nang makita kami. Sa di kalayuan subalit sapat na distansiya upang hindi magkalapit ang dalawang grupo ay nakita ko ang Black Government. Mukhang nakuha rin namin ang atensyon nila. Paano sila nabubuhay sa dorm na ito? Siguro impiyerno ang loob nito.

“Later, dude! We need to go to the office.” At hinila na niya ako palayo. Tss! Hindi ba siya naiilang sa mga estudyanteng nakatingin sa amin? Napadaan kami sa direksyon ng Black Government at naramdaman ko na

naman ang tensyon nang makita ko si Van. He looked gorgeously mysterious with those messed up brown hair… and murderous. He was glaring at us… Well, particularly at our hands. Ano bang problema niya? I tried to pull my hands away from Jin but he didn't let it go at dire-diretso kami sa school. Pumasok kami sa isang room at nakita namin si Principal Steins, yung naghatid sa akin sa dorm, isang police, isang teacher na hindi ko kilala, si Trinity, at si… Ethan? At bakit ba hindi marunong kumatok itong mokong na ito? Ethan stared at us, shocked, and then his eyes went to our hands. I pulled it back, and this time, Jin let it go.

"What is it, Mr. Cast… and Miss Leondale?" Tanong ng Principal. Wow. Natatandaan niya pa rin ako? Jin is somewhat known on this school, of course, he's a Dark Monarch and Montello High is aware of the two gangs' rivalry.

"We saw two men with guns at the Nightwoods and we think they were somewhat connected to the Arson," sagot ni Jin.

"Arson? But the police said it was faulty wiring," Trinity said. Yeah, she should definitely be here because she's the Student Council President. Jin's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"Faulty wiring? But the building's electrical wiring is sophisticated. There's no way na magpi-fail iyon," wika ni Jin.

"Mr. Cast, inimbestigahan agad namin ang nasunog na kwarto at nakakita kami ng short circuit." Nagsalita na rin ang police. So, bakit may mga weirdong tao sa Nightwoods? Wala ba talaga silang koneksiyon sa sunog?

"Pero hindi pwedeng ipagwalang bahala ang mga estrangherong iyon, 'di ba? They were armed with guns and with the fact na they're trespassing on the school's property…" Sumali na rin ako sa usapan though wala talaga akong interest sa mga ganitong bagay. Selfish? But that's just me.

"Tama ka. Iimbestigahan din namin ang bagay na iyan," sagot muli ng police.

“Salamat sa impormasyon, Mr. Cast and Miss Leondale. Pwede na kayong bumalik sa dorm niyo at magpahinga. At kayo naman, bilang President at Vice President ng Student Council, pakalmahin ninyo na ang mga nagpapanic na estudyante at siguraduhin na magpapahinga na sila,” utos ng Principal.

Sabay-sabay kaming apat na lumabas. Balak pa sana akong kausapin ni Jin but I waved him away at nagmamadaling umalis. I had enough! At medyo nilalamig na rin ako sa suot kong ito. Mukhang mas malala pa pala ang Montello High kaysa sa iniisip ko. Bukod pa sa nakakagulat malaman na si Ethan ay Vice President ng Student Council. May mali talaga sa eskwelahang ito!

Pero higit sa lahat, hindi maalis sa isip ko ang nakita namin kanina sa Nightwoods. Sino ang mga taong iyon? Ah!!! I shouldn’t bother my pretty little mind with that, right? Right?

[5] Chapter 5: Dance with the Gangsters (Part 1)

Author’s Note:

Please don’t kill me if there are some mistakes on this chapter. It’s really long (well, for me it is and according to my DEATHNOTEbook, it really is, haha) so I decided to post the first part of Chapter 5. It is mainly to avoid pressures from my friends, haha. (Em a typing sucker! haha). I’ll try to publish the next scenes as soon as I can so I really hope that you won’t give up on this story…

Oh and you might want to listen to these songs :

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGeh43A_4H0

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUOcw2oFpP8

Happy Summer days anyway…

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 5: Dance with the Gangsters (Part 1)

Isang linggo na rin akong pumapasok sa Montello High and I have to admit that those days were really active and eventful. Considering the fact that I messed up with the two gangster groups, I guess things haven't really gotten worst yet.

It's Saturday morning so I decided to spend more time with my bed. Jeez! Screw the homeworks and food and all the other stuffs! Kahit magunaw man ang mundo, hindi ako maiistorbo sa pagtulog. Yung parang may body clock yung katawan ko at kusang nagiging comatose person ako during weekends.

"Summer!" Crap! Okay. Binabawi ko na ang paggunaw ng mundo dahil niyuyugyog pa lang ang balikat ko, gusto ko nang pumaslang.

"Summer, wake up!" Er. Inilagay ko ang isang unan sa mukha ko. Someone pulled the pillow and I jerked up.

"Gusto niyo bang mamatay?!!!!!" Sigaw ko. Nakatayo lang sina Mirden at Jamie at mukhang gulat na gulat. They effin' deserved that!

"Summer, tanghali na kasi at baka gusto mong sumama sa amin sa 6th floor mamayang gabi. Nagiging clubhouse kasi yun kung saan pwedeng magparty ang mga estudyante," wika ni Mirden.

"I'm not interested!" At humiga ulit sa kama. Gawd! Just leave me alone!

At binabawi ko na rin na hindi ako interesado sa 6th floor party cause I'm here with these two, drinking cocktails. Hindi rin kasi nagsi-serve ng hard drinks sa mga estudyante. Fruit juices, beers and other soft cocktails lang. But the music is good at mukha talagang bar ang 6th floor. And a lot of those girls on the dance floor are on their slutty dresses---some of them are making out. Yikes! And good thing, walang teachers dito. Ang nagmamanage ng Saturday Party na ito ay ang Student Council, which I learned recently that Ethan Montreal holds the second highest position. Biruin mo yun!

"Hindi ka ba magbi-beer, Mirden at satisfied ka na diyan sa Blue Lemonade mo?" Tanong ni Jamie. Kaming dalawa lang kasi ni Jamie ang umiinom ng

beer na inorder niya. Oh! And we're not on a super slutty dress. Mirden is cute on her black skirt and light blue long sleeves that matched her glasses. Si Jamie naman is on her yellow cocktail dress on spaghetti strap. Okay, it's less slutty compared to those girls on their thin silk with plunging necklines exposing their cleavage and small, as in barely covering their butts.

"Do you want me to throw up?" Tanong ni Mirden. Tumawa lang si Jamie at kumuha ng pork barbecue sa mesa. Well, they really got good choice of food, too.

"Hi." Sabay-sabay kaming lumingon sa lalaking nasa harap namin. He's cute, tall and nerdy in those glasses.

"Hi." Magkasabay na sagot nina Jamie at Mirden. I just eyed him with a bored expression at uminom ng beer. I'm not interested on making new acquaintances.

"Mind if I join you?" Tanong ng lalaki.

"Sige, umupo ka," anyaya ni Mirden. Nang makaupo na siya, ibinigay ni Jamie ang isang beer. I just glared at her because that was mine!

"Freshman ka lang di ba? You're Tyler Del Valle! Panu ka nakapasok dito?" Tanong ni Mirden. Restricted kasi ang 6th floor sa freshman at sophomores.

"The Black Government pulled some strings. Sabi ko kasi kay Kuya Van, gusto kong pumunta dito." Black Government? Kuya? They're definitely not siblings, right? Magkaiba sila ng apelyido.

"Oh. So wala kang kasama?" Tanong ni Jamie.

"Ganun na nga. Uhm. Hindi ko pa kasi alam ang pangalan niyo, e. Lumapit ako sa inyo kasi feeling ko, makakasundo ko kayo at hindi kayo bully," ani Tyler. Hindi bully? Ha! Parang gusto kong ipakita sa kanya na hindi nga ako bully lalo pa at mukhang connected siya kay Van Freniere.

"I'm Jamie." Jamie winked.

"I'm Mirden." Mirden smiled.

Whoah. Ganito ba talaga sila ka-nice?

Lahat sila nakatingin sa akin at naghihintay na sabihin ko ang pangalan ko. I just rolled my eyes at them and drank my beer. Wala akong balak maging friendly.

“Ikaw yung transferee, di ba? The badass new girl? Ang dami kong naririnig tungkol sa iyo, Summer. Idol na nga kita, eh,” biglang sinabi ni Tyler. Tinaasan ko siya ng kilay. At kelan pa ako nagkaroon ng fan dahil sa pagiging bayolente at marahas ko? Bukod pa dun, sino ang nagbigay ng permiso sa kaniya na kausapin ako on a first-name basis?

“I’m really that amazing for you, huh?” I answered sarcastically.

“Oo naman. Lalo na nung binugbog mo si Brent! At saka yung mukha ni Cattleya… alam kong ikaw din ang gumawa nun,” wika ni Tyler.

“Masyado kang fan ng mga action movies,” sabi ko.

“Right, Tyler! She’s Nikita! She’s Maggi Q,” singit ni Jamie. Tumawa silang tatlo on the joke which I find not-so-funny. Napalitan ang party music ng rock song at naghiyawan, sigawan, tilian ang mga tao, lalo na ang mga babae.

“They’re here!” Nakangiting wika ni Tyler. Lumingon ako sa entrance at nakita ang pagpasok ng Black Government on their black gangster outfit. Kitang kita ko ang pagkislap ng tatlong piercings sa tainga ni Van. Pasikat. Surely, that hurts right? Since pare-pareho silang nasa upper part ng ears, sa may bones. Well, I got one piercing, too on my left ear bukod sa dalawang normal on my earlobes.

“This Saturday Night party is always theirs since teritoryo nila ito. You know, with Ethan as the organizer of it. Meron din silang access sa mga forbidden drinks,” sabi ni Jamie. That explains. May mga lumapit na girls sa kanila and they flirted with them. I found Makki getting five. What the hell! Five??? He’s really a manwhore! Ibinigay ng student bar tender ang kanilang ‘forbidden drinks’ and Van started making out with a barbie cheerleader. I felt the hot blush on my cheeks sa eksenang yun at ibinaling

ko ang atensyon ko sa pizza at fries sa mesa. Inubos ko na rin ang drinks ko at kinuha ang huling bote. Masasabi kong I'm a badass pagdating sa pag-inom ng ganitong drinks. Hindi ako basta-basta nalalasing lalo na at beer lang.

"They're gross!" Komento ni Mirden. She was also blushing. Haha. Talking about our innocent girls reaction.

"Yeah. They're hot! Totally. But those girls are making me puke! Gawd!" Umiiling na wika ni Jamie. Tumawa lang si Tyler. Ilang rock music at hiphop songs ang natapos at kumalma na ang dance floor. Tumugtog ang naka-puwestong band group. As Lovers Go of Dashboard Confessional is playing, and that's one of my favorites.

"Summer, can I have this dance?" Nakangiting tanong ni Tyler. What is he thinking? Tsk. Kung di lang mukhang kawawa 'to, nabugbog ko na rin 'to eh!

"Go dance," sagot ko at ini-wave ko ang kamay ko palayo. He blushed. Gawd! HE BLUSHED!

"I mean, with you." And he gave me one of those puppy dog eyes! Grr! That look should be illegal! What a kid!

"Pagbigyan mo na yung bata, Summer. He's harmless," nakangiting sabi ni Mirden.

"But I'm harmful," sagot ko at tumayo. Kinuha ni Tyler ang kamay ko.

"Yeah, right." At iginiya na niya ako sa dance floor.

He's tall for a freshman. Inilagay niya ang kamay ko sa balikat niya and he grabbed my small waist.

..You've got wits, you've got looks,

You've got passion, but I swear that you've got me all wrong.

All wrong.

All wrong. But you got me…

I'll be true, I'll be useful…

I'll be cavalier…i'll be yours my dear. And I'll belong to you… If you'll just let me through.

In the corner of my eyes, nakita ko si Van na nakatingin sa amin. And as usual, he's glaring at us--- or at me?--- while the chick continued on kissing his neck. Nagpanggap na lang ako na hindi ko siya nakikita. Bakit ba kasi hindi na lang sila kumuha ng kwarto? I don't want to ruin the dance since I so love Dashboard Confessional.

This is easy as lovers go,

So don't complicate it by hesitating. And this is wonderful as loving goes, This is tailor-made, whats the sense in waiting?

"Thank you, Summer, ha. For this dance. Ang totoo niyan, ito ang first dance ko. Ang saya pala ng feeling," nakangiting sabi ni Tyler.

"What? First dance mo ito?" Nanlalaki ang mga mata kong tanong. Did I just steal someone's first dance? Cause I don't deserve it.

"Oo. At masaya ako na ikaw ang first dance ko," sagot niya.

"Why did you choose me? Why not Jamie? or Mirden? I'm sure they're better than me. Kung alam ko lang Tyler, hindi na sana ako pumayag." Tsk. Ba't ba ang weirdo ng nerd na ito? Ayoko pa namang nararamdaman ang ganitong feeling. Nagi-guilty ako dahil masyadong maganda ang iniisip ni Tyler tungkol sa akin. Face it! I'm not perfect and I'm too far from being the 'good' or even 'nice' girl.

"Kasi gusto kita. I mean, yung personality mo. Basta masaya ako na sumasayaw tayo ngayon." He blushed again. He damn blushed again!

"Uh. Tyler. Okay, then. Wala na akong magagawa sa foolish first dance mo. Andito na to, eh. Pero please, don't say good things about me cause no one

does. And stop blushing," malamig na sabi ko sa kanya. I know I'm being mean but I don't want him having an opposite picture of me in his head.

"Pero---"

"Titigilan mo ang kalokohang iyan or iiwan kita dito and I'll destroy your precious first dance," banta ko sa kanya. Nanlaki ang mga mata niya sa sinabi ko subalit agad rin siyang nakabawi at tumango. Epic! Epic Monster me! Tahimik naming ipinagpatuloy ang sayaw hanggang sa maramdaman namin ang tensyon sa club. Patuloy pa rin sa pagtugtog ang banda habang tumayo naman sa kanilang kinauupuan ang mga gang boss ng Black Government which are Van, Makki, si Ethan na nasa di kalayuan at ang apat pa na di ko alam ang pangalan. Ganun din ang ginawa ng ilang mga lalaking estudyante sa paligid. Miyembro rin yata sila ng Black Government.

"Ano kaya'ng nangyari?" Takang tanong ni Tyler. Tumingin ako sa entrance at tumaas ang kilay ko sa lalaking naglalakad papasok. No one attacked him dahil mag-isa lang siya pero naka-alerto pa rin ang mga nasa paligid.

"Oh. Crap!" Papunta siya dito. Dito sa kinatatayuan namin. Tyler seemed afraid and I just wore my normal face reaction. Hindi naman siguro ako ang pakay niya. I did nothing wrong. Okay, I beat their two girls but I was just having my revenge. Baka naman si Tyler ang my kasalanan.

"Hi, Summer," nakangiting bati ni Jin. He grabbed my arm from Tyler and put it on his shoulder while his hands move to my waist. That's fast! Wala nang nagawa si Tyler.

"Sorry, freshman. I wanna dance with her at sa tingin ko restricted area ito para sayo," sabi ni Jin. Gawd! Why are boys such jerks? We danced on the last part of the song habang nakatulala lang sa amin si Tyler sa di kalayuan.

"Jerk! You just ruined his first dance! You should have waited until the music ends. Not that I wanna dance with you anyway," Walang emosyong sabi ko. I felt sorry for Tyler. Well, at least hindi ako ang sumira ng first dance niya.

“Oh, the deed’s been done. Hindi na kita kayang isoli,” biro niya. Jeez. Nagsimulang tumugtog ng bagong kanta ang banda and I recognized it as Coffee Shop Soundtrack of All Time Low. The acoustic version.

“Shit! Sabi ko naman wag nila akong sundan, eh,” galit na nasabi ni Jin habang nakatingin sa entrance. Sinundan ko ang paningin niya at nakita sina Zach, Brent, at ang ibang miyembro ng Dark Monarch na pumapasok at handang makipag-away. Talk about troubles. Nilingon ko ang natatakot na si Tyler. Poor kid!

“Puntahan mo sina Jamie at Mirden,” kalmado kong utos sa kanya.

“P-Pero Summer---” Tila atubili pa siyang iwan ako pero sinamaan ko lang siya ng tingin at agad na siyang umalis.

“You brought trouble for a dance, huh?” Sabi ko kay Jin. Patuloy pa rin kami sa pagsayaw.

“Well, I just really wanted to dance with you,” nakangiti pa rin niyang sagot.

...Should I write myself out of the history books

And mark a place in time for every chance you took? Don’t get me wrong…

Isang malakas na kamay ang humila sa braso ko and grabbed my waist. WHY AGAIN!!! Suddenly, I was being pulled away from Jin. Jin tried to grab me back but someone yanked him from behind… who turned out to be Ethan!

At nagsimula na ang gulo sa paligid. Naalala ko sina Jamie. Kahit hindi ako nice sa kanila, ayoko pa rin na masaktan ang mga iyon.

...I know you’ve got your life in place

I’ve yet to take the hint, someday I’m sure I’ll get the picture And stop waiting up…

That was the weird thing. Tuloy pa rin sa pagtugtog ang banda kahit nagkaka-riot na. Suntok, daing, sipa sa lahat ng sulok. And the guy on my side pulled me against him, putting my hands on his neck while his arms are on my waist. We're so close… close just like on that night, noong nagpalitan kami ng death threats.

"I think I'll steal this dance." Van smirked as we danced in the middle of the fighting.

"Pervet Jerk! Why do we have to be this close?" Singhal ko sa kanya. And then may boteng lumipad papunta sa direksyon namin. He made a swift yet graceful movement at hindi kami tinamaan. AGAIN! THAT'S FASTER FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!

"So you can escape the chaos. You're too weak to protect yourself. Does that answer your question?" He murmured to my ears. I frowned. WEAK?

...When it all comes down

To a sunrise on the East Side, Will you be there to carry home The remains of my wasted youth? This wasted time on you Has left me shaking in waiting, Shaking in waiting for something more…

We continued to dance and I looked to his eyes that was gazing back on mine. We gracefully moved in the middle of the war… of the gangster war. He still had his smirk on his lips and I responded with a glare.

"You looked so small, so weak and fragile. With your long , dark, brown hair, pale skin, you really looked breakable. But what is there with your pretty glaring dark eyes?" Nagulat ako sa pagiging kalmado niya. I don't received the glare, though his lips still playing his mocking smile.

"These glaring dark eyes said that I'm not weak, fragile and breakable." Iniisip ba niyang mahina ako? Even Tyler admitted that I'm badass.

...Tonight is alive with the promise of a street-fight,

And there’s money on the table That says your cheap shots won’t be able To break bones I’ve yet to break a sweat I’ll make your past regret its future Here’s to you…

This dance is far from every girl’s fairytale. Far from a dance in a prince’s ball wearing a ball gown. But why would I think about that? This dance meant nothing and he’s not even my prince. And this arrogant guy, holding me so tight… and so close… is the one whose guts I hated.

...When it all comes down

To a sunrise on the East Side, Will you be there to carry home The remains of my wasted youth? This wasted time on you Has left me shaking in waiting For something more…

“You know what? I hate devils like you. You’re so self-conceited, you think you’re the only perfect thing that ever existed,” I said while not leaving his warm light brown eyes. Beautiful gorgeous eyes on his handsome perfectly structured face. Maybe he’s right. He is indeed a perfect thing… it’s just that he’s also a devil.

“I do not need you not to hate me. I don’t even care about your existence,” malamig niyang sagot. Hinila niya ako palapit sa kanya at halos masubsob ako sa muscled chest niya. I opened my mouth to protest pero may bote ng beer na dumaan sa likod ko. INCHES ang pagitan sa likod ko! What the hell?

...Make all of my decisions for me

I’ve never taken the fall for deceit I’ll keep a secret if you keep me guessing The taste of your lips says we shouldn’t have met like…

I looked up at him just to see that we were really close. Sinubukan kong itulak siya at gumawa ng distansya pero masyado siyang malakas. Crap! Who wants to be with him in the middle of the fight? I can’t really trust him, right? Mas mabuti kung tatakasan ko ang sitwasyong ito.

“Devil! Why can’t you just fight with them and let go of me?” Lumingon siya sa paligid at tumawa siya. That evil laugh.

“You have all interesting pictures but yourself. Ano’ng masasabi mo kung ipagpatuloy ko ang pagbabasa ng ‘Don’t or You’re Dead’ folder?” Sabi niya at halos malaglag ang panga ko sa sahig dahil sa narinig ko.

...Make all of my decisions for me

I’ve never taken the fall for deceit We’ll keep a secret if you keep me guessing The taste of your lips says we shouldn’t have met like this…

I gave him my deadliest glare and I unconsciously dig my fingers on his neck.

“Ikaw! Ibalik mo ang cellphone ko,” gigil na gigil kong sabi. My nails are sinking on his skin. Pero bakit parang wala lang iyon sa kanya? Potek yung phone ko! Dun ko sini-save lahat ng gusto kong isigaw… Lahat ng galit ko… ng lungkot…

“You have a perfect big sister. Sa tingin mo ba magugustuhan ko siya?” Tanong ni Van. Hindi ko ma-kontrol ang inis ko and I sunk my nails deeper making little blood flow from the wound.

“Manwhore Jerk!”

...I can keep a secret if you can keep me guessing

The flavor of your lips is enough to keep me pressing For more than just a moment of truth between the lies told To pull ourselves away from the lives we leave back (I can keep a secret if you can keep me guessing) The flavor of your lips is enough to keep me here, keep me here…

“You’re really deadly. I can feel your bloodlust,” he said. He is still friggin’ smirking that makes my annoyance step up to the next freakin level.

“If you read it… I swear I’ll kill you!” Sigaw ko sa kanya. No one is allowed to read that! That’s more of a friggin’ diary to me.

“You don’t expect me to be scared of that, right?” He asked with a smug.

...When it all comes down

To a sunrise on the East Side, Will you be there to carry me home? The remains of my wasted youth, This wasted time on you, Has left me shaking in waiting For something more…

Magsasalita sana ako subalit dumating na ang student council at ilang mga teachers. Teachers that are fit para ayusin ang gulo. Natapos na rin ang musika at isang bagay ang nabuo sa isipan ko. This jerk! Akala ba niya hahayaan ko siyang ganituhin ako? I’m Summer Leondale at kahit demonyo pa siya… I’m going to outdo him.

Huminga ako nang malalim at inangat ang braso ko. Hindi siya kumilos, tiningnan lang niya ako. At ilang saglit pa ay tumama na ang kamao ko sa mukha niya. I’m sure na buong lakas ko ang ibinigay ko doon subalit bakit parang hindi man lang siya naapektuhan? Mas ikinagulat ko pa ang sumunod na nangyari dahil may tumulak sa akin palayo at sinampal ako nang malakas on my left cheek.

“What the hell was that for?!” I shrieked on the girl beside Van. The girl that I recognized because of her angelic face. The girl that I learned was the President of the Student Council. The sweet girl who kissed Van at the backstairs. Tss! Sinampal ako ni Gorgeous!

“Because you are caught hurting another student!” Galit na sagot ni Trinity.

“That jerk deserves it!” Sigaw ko sa kanya. Bigla namang lumapit sa tabi ko si Ethan at hinawakan ako sa braso. Afraid I might kick the ass of their lovely student leader, huh?

“Ano’ng nangyari dito?” Ethan asked with authority in his voice. Maybe now he is using his position.

“Sinaktan niya si Van at dapat parusahan ang sinumang estudyante na mahuling nananakit sa kapwa niya estudyante,” paliwanag ni Trinity. Lumingon siya kay Van at akmang hahawakan ang jaw nito pero bago pa

man niya ito magawa ay tumalikod na si Van at lumayo. Boooooo Girl!!!! Now tell me he isn't a jerk!

"Oh? Now I know the technique. Wag magpapahuli sa righteous student council. Easy! Mukha namang hindi ganun kagaling ang student council sa pagmomonitor ng school, eh." Naalala ko noong tinulungan ako ni Ethan. Nagbabantay kaya siya noon?

"Miss Summer Leondale, pumunta ka sa maintenance room bukas ng umaga. You will help on cleaning the locker rooms at comfort rooms on the gym. Yun ang magiging parusa mo." The hell! What is she saying?!

"What?!! Gagawin mo akong janitress? Wow! Hindi ka lang pala loser, unfair ka pa! Mas malala ang ginawa ng mga gangster na yun kesa sakin!" Ginagalit niya ako! Temper… temper… calm down…

"Trinity, hindi siya kasali sa riot dito. Baka may ginawa lang si Van na hindi niya nagustuhan. You know him, he's just like that," wika ni Ethan. Subalit umiling lang si Trinity.

"May parusa rin sa mga nahuli rito ng student council, teachers at guards. Nanakit siya ng estudyante kaya…"

"And what made you think that I'll do that, huh?" Tanong ko. No way that I'm gonna do that! No way!

"We can call your guardians and ask them instead to perform the consequences," sagot ni Trinity na ikinalaglag ng panga ko. What? My father? My righteous father will clean the dirty locker room and comfort room?

"You're sick!!!" I screeched on her. Pag hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko baka mabasag ko ang magandang pagmumukha nito. It'll be a waste! But who cares? I don't!

"It's just my job, Miss Leondale. I have to keep the peace in Montello High. I, together with Ethan and the other student bodies are trying to instill the

organization of the school. If you haven't heard about me yet, I'm Trinity Domingo and the President of the Student Council."

Nakakagalit talaga! Napakalaking irony ng reyalidad ng eskuwelahan na ito sa mga sinasabi niya!

"Cut it out! I'm not interested in knowing you! But then, just because I punched the face of your little crush whom you tried to make out with at the backstairs doesn't mean that I'm messing with the school's organization!" Nang makita kong napanganga siya--- maging si Ethan--- sa sinabi ko, tinalikuran ko sila at nag-umpisang maglakad palayo. Pero bago ako lumabas sa exit, lumingon ako sa kinaroroonan nila at sumigaw.

"HEY, BACKSTAIRS GIRL! I'M GONNA GET THE CONSEQUENCES TOMORROW! NO NEED TO CALL HOME!" At tumakbo na ako palabas.

Jeez! She's a real bitch! Parang gusto ko nang isipin na bagay nga sila ni Van! Tss! Hindi man lang ako nakaganti sa pananampal niya sa akin! It's not my fault if her true love is a real jerk! Bakit ba gustong-gusto niya ang lalaking iyon? He's damn good-looking, fine! But that's not enough to like someone! It will lead you to nowhere! He offers hell! At after siyang gawing tanga ni Van sa backstairs, ipinagtatanggol niya pa rin?! So much for my sympathy--- now I pity her! What an idiot!

Dapat talaga nagpaka-comatose na lang ako sa kama ko buong araw ng Sabado, eh! DAMN!

[6] Chapter 6: Dance with the Gangsters (Part 2)

Chapter 6: Dance with the Gangsters (Part 2)

"SUMMER!!!" Napalingon ako sa tumawag sa akin at nakita sina Jamie na papalapit sa direksyon ko. Kasama pa rin nila yung Freshman.

"Okay ka lang ba? Hinila na kasi kami ni Tyler palabas nung nagkagulo, eh," tanong ni Jamie na nag-aalala. Uh, wala namang dahilan para mag-alala sila at hindi rin iyon ang kailangan ko.

“I’m not bleeding to death so that means I’m fine,” sagot ko. Ini-stretch ko ang ankles ng paa ko. Gawd! Hindi talaga ako tumatagal sa heeled shoes. I mean, I can endure it but I don’t have the patience.

“Summer… that Jin… Is he your boyfriend?” Nagba-blush na tanong ni Tyler. Tumungo siya sa lupa nang tingnan ko siya nang masama.

“Ano bang sinasabi mo, Tyler?” Tanong ni Mirden na tila amused sa reaction ni Tyler.

“No,” tipid kong sagot na ikinaliwanag naman ng mukha niya. Okay, so ano bang problema ng weird na ito?

“T-talaga? K-kasi… ah…” He stuttered and I cut him off.

“Alam mo ba kung saan ang kwarto ni Van sa boy’s dorm? Meron bang daan para makarating doon nang hindi dumadaan sa normal na daan at walang nakakapansin?” Tanong ko. Well, kailangan kong makuha ang phone ko… sa marahas na paraan kung kinakailangan dahil mukhang hindi ko iyon makukuha sa normal na paraan.

“Bakit parang may nararamdaman akong hindi maganda?” Sambit ni Jamie. Tumingin sila sa akin na tila nababaliw na ako subalit hindi ko na lang iyon pinansin.

“Summer, balak mo bang gawin ang iniisip kong binabalak mo?” Tanong ni Tyler na tila hindi makapaniwala sa akin.

“Sasabihin mo ba sa akin o kailangan pang saktan kita?” Banta ko sa kanya.

“Pero, Summer, delikado iyon. Sa tingin ko isang slaughter house ang papasukin mo! Baka hindi ka makalabas nang buhay!” Sabi ni Mirden

“Bakit gusto mong magbuwis ng buhay? Baka maabutan ka ng curfew,” wika ni Jamie. Huminga ako nang malalim. There’s really no sense telling them but I don’t want them nudging me on about stuffs.

“That jerk’s got my phone! At kailangan ko iyong makuha! Now, Tyler? Masyadong manipis ang pasensya ko.” At sinamaan ko ang pa tingin sa

kawawang freshman. Ayoko sanang mang-bully pero…

“Sa likod. May balcony ang room niya… kasama niya doon si Kuya Makki. Sa left side ng second floor sila, sa right side naman ang mga taga-Dark Monarch. May puno sa mismong harap ng balcony. Kaya mo bang umakyat ng puno?” Tanong ni Tyler. Easy-peasy! Kayang-kaya kahit 6-inches pa ang heels na gamit ko. Oh, that was ridiculous already. Sa tingin ko 3-inches lang ang sandals ko. At pwede ko naman itong tanggalin.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” sagot ko at hinila na siya sa braso palabas. We ran down the stairs while Jamie and Mirden are hot on our heels. Nang makalabas na kami ng building, tinaboy ko na palayo ang dalawang roommates ko. Kung gusto kong maging super spy, baka maging sagabal lang sila. Tahimik kaming nag-jog sa likod ng boy’s dorm. 10:00 pm sabi sa relo ko at nasa tapat na ako ng puno.

“Sa first floor pala ang room ko. Sigurado ka ba sa gagawin mo?” Nakailang tanong na ba ang mokong na ito? At saka ano namang paki-elam ko kung saan ang kwarto niya? Tsk!

“Just go! Kaya ko na ito! And Tyler, keep your mouth shut!” Sabi ko sa kanya. Nagdadalawang-isip siya kung iiwan ako but I gave him my death glare. Tahimik na siyang umikot sa front building.

“Time for revenge, Van Freniere.” Bulong ko at tinanggal ang istorbong sandals sa paa ko. Nang maisabit ko na ang strap nito sa magkabilang braso ko ay agad kong inakyat ang puno. I don’t want to lose this shoes because I don’t want to leave any evidence. Tahimik kong inakyat ang mga sanga habang pinapanatili ang balance ko. Madilim ang kwarto at mukhang walang tao. Siguro may pinuntahan silang ibang lugar bukod sa sixth floor.

Well, that place was already a trash. Dapat pala tumulong ako sa pagsira ng mga bagay doon para mahirapan ang student council sa pag-aayos. I’d love to see that Trinity girl having a hard time cleaning the area. Tss! To think na kinampihan ko pa siya nung una!

Napatigil ako nang tila may ingay at mga boses sa loob ng kwarto. Patience…oh, wala nga pala ako nun. Okay, TIMING! The art of timing.

Kinikilig na tawa ng mga babae ang napakinggan ko at mabuti na lang, itim ang dress ko. Hindi nila ako makikita kung sakaling tumingin sila sa direksyon ng puno. Tahimik akong nagtago sa likod ng malaking trunk. Well, I'm small and weightless. Parang hangin lang ang nagpapagalaw sa puno tuwing nag-shi-shift ako ng weight. I'm definitely an expert on it. May mga puno din naman sa bahay namin at kapag pinapagalitan ako ni Daddy at hinahanap ako ni Autumn, umaakyat ako sa isa sa mga puno at nagtatago.

"Van, sweetie, how about a round two?" Maarteng tinig ng babae.

"Cattleya, you're not really that good. So I don't want a round two." Bruskong boses ni Van.

WHAT THE FUDGE! CHOCO FUDGE! Cattleya? The barbie bitch of Dark Monarch? So kaya pala niya ako pinigilan dati na bugbugin ang Cattleya na yun, because she's one of his whores!

"Hey, Van, how about we change courts? Mukha namang okay lang dito kay Scarlett, eh." Boses ni Makki na sinundan ng maarteng tawa ng babae.

Ginagawa ba nila ang iniisip kong ginagawa nila?! NO! NO! I don't want to witness it… Oh, no! I DON'T WANNA HEAR IT! MY EARS! MY FRIGGIN' INNOCENT EARS! Baka masuka ako dito at mawalan ng balance at mahulog at mamatay! Ang taas pa naman ng kinalalagyan ko.

"Game!!!" Sang-ayon ni Van at halos malaglag ako sa puno dahil sa automatikong paglagay ng mga kamay ko sa aking tainga. Bago tuluyang malaglag ay niyakap ko ang isang sanga at kinalma ang sarili ko. I'll kill those whores! I'll kill those jerks! Disgusting bastards!

Ilang minuto akong naghintay at nagtiis sa magaspang na puno at sa pakikinig sa not-so-pure and not-so-clean nilang ginagawa. Argh! Nagtataka nga ako kung bakit walang dugo sa ilong at tainga ko. And that damn blushing! I blushed all the time that they did that! Gawd! That's torture! Ilang minuto pa ang lumipas at natigil na ang… ang mala-impyernong tunog. If that's heaven for them then it's hell for me! I maybe a badass bitch but I have a conservative view about those kind of stuffs. I do

believe on the sanctity and purity of a woman's body and have learned to treasure it. But these girls… okay, that was them. Maybe their neurons have different structures but… save it for their opinions. But on these manwhores, I think I would love to be a punisher.

"Maging gentlemen naman kayo and walk us back to our dorm," malambing na sabi ni Cattleya. Err! Ladies and gentlemen! Why can't you act as one?!

"We're in a modern era and medieval period is gone. Haven't you heard about gender equality?" Tanong ni Makki. Hindi sumagot ang dalawang babae. IDIOTS!

"Barbies don't have brains, Makki. Halika na, ihatid natin sila half way to their dorm. Malapit nang magcurfew." Boses ni Van at sinundan ng mga yabag ng paa at mga tawa… papalayo… hanggang sa mapakinggan ko ang pagsara ng pinto. BARBIES DON'T HAVE BRAINS...AND THOSE GIRLS JUST GIGGLED??? Anlabo! Stupido!!! I stretched myself at gumapang sa makapal na sanga palapit sa balkonahe.

CURFEW! CRAP! It's 10:40 pm already mula sa relo ko at ang curfew time is 11:00 pm! Got to get my phone! I've already suffered a lot para lang sumuko. Ayokong lumabas na naghintay ako nang matagal para lang pakinggan ang mga… ugh! Screw those things! Don't wanna have nightmares!

As soft and swift as cat, I landed on the carpeted floor of the balcony. The glass sliding door is open and I could just see how elegant and bigger the room is compared to ours! Er! Mayaman nga pala sila at pinapaboran ng Montello High ang abilidad ng bawat isa… financially. Sa narinig ko, Top 1 si Van Freniere sa buong school. Sumunod si Zach Martinia, si Ethan Montreal, then si Makki Sison, tapos si Jin Cast at ang iba pa… and the bullshit thing is Trinity Domingo placed as Top 10. She's the only girl who grabbed a place on the Powerful 10. At sa tingin ko ay nakatulong doon ang yaman niya at ang pagiging President ng Student Council. The standards of ranking? Screw normal things because they measure the Strength, Intelligence, Power of the Family at iba pa na hindi ko mapaniwalaang

sinusukat nila. Tsk! Powerful 10… Siguro na-perfect ni Van lahat. Except for the ‘attitude’. He’ll get zero points on that.

Tahimik akong naglakad papasok ng kwarto at HOLY MOTHER OF CHEESECAKE! THIS IS ALL UNFAIR! Tell me! Ipinagsisigawan ng kwartong ito na mayayaman ang mga nagmamay-ari nito. From the two king-sized bed, large walk-in closet, their own plasma TV, paintings--- WHAT THE HECK!--- Pati paintings? Yeah, wala sa room namin nun. Uh! Normal lang naman na maging inggitera ako diba?!

Stop playing around, Summer! Kailangang mahanap ko na ang phone ko. So where are Van’s things? The velvet black bed or the silky royal blue one? I checked the black one cause it’s unique and it smelled like Van. Yeah! Curse me! I still remember how he smells? Dali-dali kong binuksan ang drawer. It’s his! Dahil merong marble stone with his name carved on it. Parker pens, wrist watches, his I-phone 4S, PSP, Tablet, and box of… protections? What a manwhore! Remind me to burn these later… No! Ngayon na! But not burn, I think! I don’t want to have Fire Alert Part 2! Kinuha ko iyon at itinaktak ang laman sa trash can. Right! Girls like ME don’t like seeing these stuffs especially after they tortured my ears on hearing perverted things! Uh! Ibinalik ko ang walang lamang kahon sa drawer at binuksan ang pangalawang drawer sa ibaba.

Laptop, books… he’s reading Hunger Games, too? And Michael Crichton? Sidney Sheldon? Stephen King? Wait! Windmills of God and Pompeii! Nabasa ko na ito, ah. Now, where’s my friggin phone? Isinara ko iyon at binuksan ang closet. Wow, signature clothes, huh? And gorgeous gold and silver piercings and earrings? Stupid rich kids! But no phone. I pulled the drawer below it and blushed when I saw its content… boxers… briefs… and my PHONE! That jerk! Nilagay niya ang phone ko dito? Dito sa mga…. kamuhi-muhing mga bagay na ‘to?! Knowing the manwhore that he is, baka nalagyan na ng germs ang phone ko, ah! Whatever! Ang mahalaga ay mission accomplished!

I grabbed my phone at pumunta sa drawer ni Makki. I told you I’m your sweet little punisher and emptied his box of protections, too. Aww. No more fun nights for them… for a while. But at least, a pain for their urges. Or maybe they’ll still push it without the… whatever! Still, at least I tried na sa

maliit na paraan ay panindigan ang paniniwala ko. Lumingon ako sa closet ni Van. Oh no! I haven't closed it yet. Tumakbo ako at nang akmang isasarado ko na, nakarinig ako ng mga yabag sa tapat ng pinto at ang warning sound sa speaker na nagsasabing CURFEW TIME. No one's allowed outside!

I'm dead. I'm seriously dead. Parang slow motion na tiningnan ko ang pagpihit ng door knob. DIE NOW or DIE HARD? Argh! DIE HARDER! Huminga ako nang malalim at pumasok sa closet at saka isinara iyon. Kasabay nun ay narinig ko ang pagpasok nina Van at Makki. Waaah! I pray to all Deities and Saints na hindi nila ako makita… or wag nang buksan ni Van ang closet na ito.

"Did you see Zach's face nang makita niya ang isa sa mga Barbie girls niya na kasama natin with her arms wrapped around you? Man, we just broke his ego!" Tawa ni Makki. So those disgusting things are part of gang fight for them?! Uh!

"Yeah! But it was just for seconds. He did not seem to care at all. Maybe because he knew that Cattleya is a natural slut and he can't do anything about it," sagot ni Van.

"But Scarlett is great. That cheerleader. I think I'm gonna invite her again." Okay, Makki is the sluttiest man I've ever met! Casanova jerk! Lothario! Manwhore!

"She's pretty and quite good. But I don't use a thing twice. And Trinity is… better than her…" Medyo humina ang boses ni Van nang banggitin niya si Trinity. So she's really better, huh? Tsk. Then why is he acting like as an asshole towards her?! No, not just to her. He's really an asshole, period.

Someone sniffed. "Hey, I don't recognize this sweet smell! Eto ba yung perfume na gamit nina Scarlet at Cattleya? Pero hindi, eh," sabi ni Makki. Gawd! Is he a werewolf? Oh! He's a mongrel! Naamoy niya ako!

"I don't know. It smells familiar to me, though. Baka matagal talagang mawala yung pabango nila. Whatever, dude. Just turn the light off at matutulog na ako," wika ni Van. Tumahimik ang paligid at mukhang

matutulog na sila. Ilang minuto ang lumipas at sobrang sumasakit na ang katawan ko sa closet. It's not so small pero hindi ako kumportable sa masisikip na lugar.

"Van, I think Jin likes that new girl and Tyler is kinda having a little crush on her," bigla na lang binanggit ni Makki. Are they talking about me? I'm the new girl… but I don't think Jin likes me and I just bullied Tyler and I'm sure no one's having a crush on the person who scares you.

"Ah, Summer. The childish bitch," sagot ni Van. Okay… alright… fine… WHAT THE HECK IS HIS PROBLEM!!!

"She's cute, Van! Siya yung tipong parang kailangan mong protektahan." Wow, Makki! I'm sure that I can handle myself, so you don't have to protect me.

"You like her, too? I think Ethan does," seryosong wika ni Van. What the heck? Ethan likes me? Okay, they are the worst Gossip Boys ever! They are Handsome Little Liars! And I'm the poor one who does the eavesdropping. I'm sure their info is useless and they don't have any other interesting topic.

"No. Of course not, Pare. She's just cute… and feisty. And hell, she's childish… I don't know how to babysit her." Er! Parang gusto kong magtransform into a killing machine, ah. Remind me to kill Makki while he's sleeping!

"I know, dude. Or you'll break your standards. We prefer ramp models not small girls. And she's ugly. And flat-chested. She doesn't know how to smile and she's a lot to handle." Grr! Calm down, Summer… Calm down. Flat-chested? Small? Ugly? Higit sa lahat, as if HE KNOWS HOW TO SMILE!

"She looked weak and fragile and unlady-like," dagdag ni Makki. WHAT? Weak and fragile, huh? Temper-go away! Calm down! You'll be dead… or THEY'LL BE DEAD!

"She's a real bitch and she thinks she can defeat us. She's an emo brat who's jealous of her pretty older sis…" Hindi na naituloy ni Van ang

sasabihin niya dahil nagkatotoo na ang Mayan Calendar! It’s Doom’s Day! It’s their Doom’s Day!

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING IN MY CLOSET?!!” Gulat na tanong ni Van. Pareho silang napaupo sa kama ni Makki nang bigla kong sinipa pabukas ang closet at galit na lumabas. Oh, did I mention that I’m already on my stilletos?

“I’M HERE TO KILL YOU!!!” And I lunged on top of him grabbing his neck! Okay, I should not think that I’m sitting on his shirtless 8-pack abs. That was why he didn’t open the closet, because he’s sleeping with only his boxers. But whatever! I’m bound to kill him! Sinubukan niyang tanggalin ang braso ko pero hindi ba niya alam na lumalakas ang isang tao ng triple kapag nagagalit? This, in my case, is bloodlust!

“SUMMER! STOP!” Wika ni Van subalit mas hinigpitan ko pa ang pagsakal sa kanya. I’m determined to choke him to death and will be happy to watch the light leave his eyes and I’ll---

Nagulat ako nang bigla niya akong hawakan sa waist and rolled my back to the bed so he’s on the top and pinning me. Dahil nasurpresa ako, wala na akong nagawa nang hawakan niya ang braso ko and put them on my sides.

“GET OFF ME! YOU DEVIL!” I snapped at him. Makki is already standing beside the bed and is watching us with wide eyes.

“Only if you calm down,” inis na sagot ni Van. I glared at him pero nang marealize kong I won’t do better this time, tumango ako. Umalis siya at umupo sa gilid ng kama. I jumped on the other side.

“Okay, Summer… Ano’ng ginagawa mo dito?” Tanong ni Makki. I continued to shot daggers on them. I grabbed my phone from the floor.

“I’m here to get this pero di ko ini-expect na magiging witness ako ng inyong dirty little things at makarinig ng tsismis… and worse, being those gossips ending up with me as your poor subject! And believe me, I’m ready to kill now because of the insults!” Isinigaw ko sa kanila ang huling part.

Bakit ba kailangan nilang matulog ng shirtless! Ang hirap tuloy planuhin ng kamatayan nila!

“It’s already past curfew. Hindi ka na pwedeng makita sa labas,” inis na sabi ni Van.

“I know that! And I’m telling you this devil, I’m not jealous of Autumn!!!” I screamed at him. Hindi ba sila mag-aapologize? Pero kahit mag-apologize sila, I don’t think na kalmado ko iyong tatanggapin.

“Tone your voice down, Summer. Baka may makarinig sayo,” sabi ni Makki.

“Manwhore!!!” I snapped at him pero hininaan ko na ang aking boses. Ayokong magkaroon pa ng ibang witness sa krimeng gagawin ko.

“Easy, Cute Girl. Ibig mo bang sabihin ay kanina ka pa nasa closet? At nakita mo ang party dito with girls?” Tanong ni Makki.

“No. Nasa puno ako!” Tinuro ko ang puno sa labas na sinundan naman nila ng tingin at pareho nila akong binigyan ng ‘Are-you-Crazy?-look’

“What?! Seriously?! Paano kung nahulog ka doon?” Tss. Talaga bang weak and fragile ang tingin ni Makki sa akin? And cute girl? What the-!

“She’s a monkey. She’s not that cute,” nakakunot-noong sabi ni Van. Kinuha ko ang pinakamalapit na unan at ibinato sa kanya.

“The hell with you!!!” Galit na sabi ni Van. Wow. Hindi ba siya sanay na binabato siya ng unan?

“Well, hell is for you! Devil!” Sagot ko. Kinuha ni Van ang I-phone niya sa drawer.

“Let’s call Ethan at ipaalam natin sa student council na may outsider sa dorm natin.” Oh no! He’s not gonna do that! I snatched the phone out of his hand.

“You’re not gonna call anyone, jerk!” Galit kong wika.

“Leondale, ibigay mo sa akin ang phone!” Mahinahon subalit may pagbabantang sabi ni Van.

“No!” Matigas kong sagot.

“Van, sa tingin ko wag nalang nating isumbong si cute girl,” wika ni Makki.

“He’s right! Supilin mo muna ang pagiging sumbungero mo,” agad kong sang-ayon.

Tiningnan kami ng masama ni Van at parang kinakalkula ang sitwasyon. He’s really the leader type. Now I wonder kung bakit si Trinity ang President ng Student Council.

“Anong iniisip mo, Makki, at gusto mo na huwag nating isumbong ang babaeng iyan?” Tanong ni Van. Pareho silang tumingin sa akin. Okay! Pag may ginawa silang hindi ko nagustuhan, tatapusin ko na talaga sila. I’m only 17 kaya sa Juvenile Detention lang naman siguro ako at itututuring nila itong self-defense—

“Let her sleep here until morning?” Suhestiyon ni Makki na ikinataas ng kilay ko. Ilang sandaling nag-isip si Van. Ayokong matulog sa kuta ng mga demonyo pero paano pag nahuli ako habang pabalik sa dorm ko? Nai-imagine ko na ang Part 2 ng Janitress punishment ko! Uh! Wala bang ibang choice?

“That’s just fine with me. Doon ka sa couch,” wika ni Van. GREAT! Ayoko pa namang natutulog sa couch!

“No. I’ll take the bed! Doon ka sa couch!” Tinulak ko si Van palayo ng kama at humiga doon. Hmm… this black bed is softer.

“Get out of my bed! And get your f ck ng shoes off!” Galit na sabi ni Van. Naiiling na bumalik na si Makki sa kama niya while Van is fuming with anger. Aw… the Prince will sleep on the couch. Too bad.

“Shh. Don’t turn the lamp off, okay. Now, you go to your couch,” kalmado ko nang sabi at hinigit palapit sa katawan ko ang malambot na comforter.

Galit na sumampa si Van sa kama at kinuha ang dalawang paa ko.

“What the heck are you doing?” Gulat kong tanong.

“Taking your shoes off! Hard-headed girl!” Inis na sagot nito habang tinatanggal ang strap ng shoes ko. Nang maalis na niya ang sapatos ay itinapon na niya ang mga iyon sa sahig.

“Hey, Devil! Pag nasira ang heels ko, I swear that---”

“Kaya kong palitan ang sapatos na yan ng mas madami at mas mahal pa. Now, move to the other side! Cause there’s no way that I’m gonna sleep on the couch.”

“What?! You should give me your bed because this is all your fault! Kung hindi mo kinuha ang cellphone ko, hindi sana ako nag-adventure dito!” Inis na sabi ko pero hindi na siya nakinig at tinakpan niya ng unan ang tainga niya. And worse, he turned the lamp off! Jeez! I can’t sleep when it’s dark!

“Buksan mo lang yung lampshade! Jerk!” Hindi siya sumagot. Peste talaga ang lalaking ito. Ginagalit ako! “Buksan mo sabi, eh!” At sinipa ko siya sa likod. He whimpered and turned the lamp on.

“Masakit yun, ah! Pag hindi kita natantiya!!!” Galit na sabi niya. Sasagot sana ako subalit nagsalita ang inaantok na si Makki.

“Kayong dalawa, tama na ang lambingan. Pwede pa rin naman. Pwede pa rin naman pero pakihinaan lang. I’m sleepy, dude.” Pareho naming tiningnan ng masama si Makki. If looks could kill, he could be dead on the spot. And I’ll glare at Van until he drop dead, too.

“Shut the hell up, Makki! Bakit hindi ka na lang matulog sa couch at ibigay mo sa bwisit na ito ang higaan mo?” Inis na wika ni Van.

Kruuu…kruuuu…kruuu… Ambilis makatulog, ha. Nanatili ako sa gitna ng kama. Bahala siya sa buhay niya. Basta sa akin ang malambot na kamang ito ngayong gabi.

“Jeez! Umurong ka sabi, e!” At itinulak ako ni Van na muntik ko nang ikinahulog. Sana nari-realize niya na magaan lang ako kaya hindi na niya kailangang laksan pa ang pagtulak.

“Hey, Devil! Can’t you just be a gentleman?” Reklamo ko sa kanya at hinila ang kumot. Narinig ko naman ang mahinang hagikhik ni Makki.

“Watch your words, Summer. It really sounds so wrong,” pabulong na sabi ni Van… bulong pero napakinggan naman namin ni Makki. Nag-effort pa siyang bumulong!

“Yeah, Van. Be gentle to Cute Girl,” wika ni Makki. Er!

“SHUT UP, MAKKI!” Sabay naming singhal ni Van. Tsk. Note to self: I’ll kill Makki later!

“Fine! Bawal bang mag-sleep talk?” Sagot niya and he rolled on his side. Natahimik kaming lahat.

Wow, paano ako makakatulog? Lumingon ako kay Van. I mean, sa malapad at gorgeously muscled na likod ni Van dahil nakatalikod siya sa akin. Tsk! Never pa akong natulog nang may katabing lalaki, so shall I take the small couch? No! Last time na natulog ako sa couch, sumakit ang katawan ko at nahulog ako. And swear that’s not a very good experience. But then, this jerk beside me--- this badass hot jerk beside me--- is… is… uh! I already wanted to kill him! I think I won’t be sleeping soundly unless he’s dead! At ang hirap balewalain ng presensiya niya. Nakakainis! Bakit ba nandito ako sa sitwasyong ito?

...I swear that you don’t have to go

I thought we could wait for the fireworks

I thought we could wait for the snow

To wash over Georgia and kill the hurt

I thought I could live in your arms

And spend every moment I had with you

Stay up all night with the stars

Confess all the faith that I had in you (I had in you)...

A phone is ringing, at nasa ilalim iyon ng unan ko. Pero hindi naman iyon ang ringtone ko, a. The Last Time ng Amber Pacific ang ringtone ko. Kinapa ko ang phone… dalawang phone… sa ilalim ng unan. Baka phone ni Van. Kinuha ko ang I-phone at pinindot ang answer button sa screen. Mukha namang tulog na ang lalaking ito at tinakpan pa niya ng unan ang ulo niya. Stupid! His fault!

“Van… mabuti naman sinagot mo at gising ka pa pala…” Tiningnan ko ulit ang screen and it’s Trinity! Wow! Hindi ako sumagot at pinakinggan ko lang siya.

“Okay lang kahit wala kang sabihin… pero dahil sinagot mo ang tawag ko ibig sabihin hindi ako balewala sayo…” Gusto kong tumawa. I’m a meanie, I know. But she really is pathetic! I think I’ll have some fun with this.

“Van, let’s start again please… Gusto---” Nagulat ako nang may umagaw sa phone. At medyo natakot ako nang makita ang galit na mukha ni Van na ini-end ang call.

“And who told you to use my phone?” Galit niyang tanong.

“Easy, dude! You used my phone, too!” Sagot ko at tumalikod sa kanya. Grr! Now, he knows what it feels like to have your privacy invaded!

“Ano’ng sinabi niya?” Kalmado na niyang tanong. Alam kong nakatingin siya sa akin kaya hindi na lang ako lumingon.

“Kung interesado ka sa sasabihin niya, bakit in-end mo yung tawag?” Bored kong sagot. Tutulugan ko na lang siya. Anlabo nila. Kung gusto nilang marinig ang isa’t isa then all they need to do is talk! Nakakainis! Ugh! Ba’t ba ko naiinis? Dahil anlabo nila? At bakit anlabo ko rin? He grabbed my arm at iniharap ako sa kanya.

“What is it, devil?” Inis na tanong ko… tss. He’s really perfect. Ngayon ko lang napagtuunan ng pansin ang long lashes niya. Super striking ng features niya lalo na kapag kasing iksi lang ng isang ruler ang lapit mo sa kaniya. And those mysterious beautiful brown eyes! They could not belong to a human… I feel like being… enchanted by those orbs… What am I thinking? Erase! Erase!

“Ano’ng sinabi niya?” Mahina niyang ulit sa tanong. That husky voice is urging me to tell the… What the fudge! Am I sleepy already?

“She wanted for the both of you to start again! Happy now? Go! Go! Fight for your sweet forlorn love! Pathetic lovers!” At binawi ko ang braso ko sa kamay niya. Tsk! Anlabo talaga nila!

“Just sleep now, okay! And don’t do anything stupid! There’s no forlorn love here!” He murmured and rolled his back to me. I stuck my tongue out on him before rolling to my side. Siya nga itong stupid, eh.

“Nice theme song anyway! Three Cheers for Five Years, huh,” bulong ko.

“SHUT UP!” Jeez! What an ears! Napakinggan niya pa yun?

Tss. Magiging mahimbing kaya ang tulog ko sa kuta ng demonyo?

[7] Chapter 7: The Punishment (Part 1)

Author’s Note:

Tadaaah! So here’s The Punishment! Before I ruin my apology (for the late update) with an excuse (my Summer Get-aways), I wanna shout out: I <3 Sibale, Romblon! It's like Boracay with is white sand and blue and green shade of the sea! Lovely people, wonderful clan! And I just can't get over it! Haha! So please, pretty please, eat up my sorry! Ooops! And I'm forever grateful to my editor, MUB! Gawd! She's always pressuring me! Tsk! I really wanna block her on fb! Peace, dude! And for the patience, arigatou!

Here it goes! I’m gonna hit the pillows and pass out now! Happy Summer Days! And may the odds ever be in your favor! Haha. ·

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 7: The Punishment (Part 1)

I hate mornings. I hate waking up early. Which, I think almost all teenagers share the same feelings with me. Pero mukhang ito na ang pinakakumportableng pag-gising na ginawa ko. I definitely love the warm and sweet breath that falls at the back of my neck, smelling like mint and berries. And the arm that's wrapped tightly and protectively around my waist keeps me at the center of the soft black velvet bed of the dark prince--- WHAT??? Breath on my neck? Arms? I turned around and--- HOLY MOTHER OF CHEESECAKE!

Bago pa ako nakapag-isip ng logical reasonings at rumehistro sa utak ko ang flashback and problem solving techniques, lumanding na ang kamao ko sa gwapong mukha ni Van.

"MOTHER-FATHER! WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?!!" Galit na sigaw ko sa mukha niya at umupo sa kama.

"What the f ck, bitch! Can't you just do 'good mornings'?" Inis na sagot niya habang hawak-hawak ang pisngi. I checked myself… okay. I'm still on my black dress. And I'm just over-reacting. Note! Wag bibiruin ang sarili pag bagong gising 'cause I definitely lose all the humor. Pareho kaming napalingon sa pagbukas ng pinto. Makki is still on his dream state so definitely, it's not him. And I blushed like hell (See? Blushing like hell? That's extreme!) when I saw Ethan on the door way--- pale as a chalk with wide, shocked eyes. And then… anger? And he quickly shifted on his blank face.

"Not that I have to explain something but it's not what you think," wika ko. Tsk! Bakit ba pakiramdam ko ay may ginawa akong masama? Bukod sa I trespassed on his room to get my phone--- oh, may ginawa nga yata akong masama.

"She sneaked in here last night by climbing the tree at naabutan siya ng curfew. Get her! She's a trespasser," inis pa rin na sabi ni Van.

“Your fault, Devil! Kung hindi mo kinuha ang phone ko---!” Uh, ayoko nang ulit-ulitin sa taong makitid ang utak na kasalanan niya ito. Er!

“Shhhh! Sleeping person here,” Makki murmured with eyes still closed. Pareho namin siyang sinamaan ng tingin. Buhay pa pala siya. I forgot to sleep-walk last night to kill him. Kinuha ni Ethan ang magkahiwalay kong sapatos sa carpeted floor at pumunta sa kamang kinaroroonan namin. His face is still blank nang hawakan niya ako sa waist at halos buhatin paalis ng kama.

“Ethan---” I started but he cut me off.

“Nakalimutan mo bang may punishment ka ngayon? Kunin mo na ang mga kakailanganin mo sa maintenance room,” sabi niya. Oh, crap. I already envisioned hell for this bloody day!

“Punishment? What for?” Kunot-noong tanong ni Van. I rolled my eyes at him. HIS FAULT AGAIN!

“Your pathetic Trinity punished me for punching you last night. Mabuti na lang at di niya nakita na sinapak ulit kita kanina,” sagot ko at kinuha ang phone sa ilalim ng unan at ang shoes ko mula kay Ethan. Tumakbo ako papunta sa balcony at naramdaman kong sumunod sila sa akin. Jeez! Ano bang iniisip nila? Umakyat ako sa may porch at ni-measure ang layo ng makapal na sanga. Easy-peasy!!!

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!” It’s Van’s angry voice. Nilingon ko sila and their expression is--- I don’t know--- out of this world? Priceless? Shocked? Amused, worried, concerned, angry--- lahat yan nasa hitsura nila. Even Makki, who is now standing by the sliding door, turned his sleepy eyes wide.

“What do I think I’m doing? Duh! I’m taking the emergency exit!” Umiling ako at tumalon sa sanga. I heard their gasps and I silently giggled. Talking about a funny Sunday Morning.

“SUMMER! ARE YOU CRAZY?!” Nice question, Ethan. Lumingon ako sa kanila habang bina-balance ang sarili ko.

“You have no idea, Ethan.” I smiled and climbed down gracefully. Isa lang naman ang technique, eh. Don’t look down kapag alam mong nasa mataas kang bahagi.

“Shit! Careful, Cute Girl! Or hintayin mo ko sa ibaba!!! I’ll catch you there!” Boses ni Makki na halatang kagigising lang.

“No need, Makki,” sagot ko at humakbang sa mababang sanga. Yey! I’m the sexy graceful black cat! Tumalon ako sa ground nang matantiya kong kaya ko na. Feeling ko talaga ako si Nikita pag ginagawa ko ito, eh. Or the one on the Naked Weapon or on So Close. It’s just that ayoko ng witnesses. Isinuot ko ang heels ko at lumingon sa balcony sa second floor. I gave them my badass smirk and waved goodbye nang tumakbo ako palayo. Haha! I know that’s a scene— leaving the gorgeous guys with their mouths gaping.

Binuksan ko ang pinto ng dorm at nagulat ako ng salubungin ako ni Jamie ng superhug! – cause it’s supertight I could barely breathe.

“Jamie, C-can’t breathe!” I gasped at binitawan niya ako. Better. Not until Mirden hugged me tight. Tss. These hug monsters!

“Ano’ng nangyari kagabi? Bakit hindi ka nakauwi? We’re so worried about you!” Sabi ni Jamie.

“You don’t have to be worried kung isisisi niyo sa akin na nag-alala kayo,” I answered sarcastically. I. AM. SO. NOT. USED. TO. IT! I mean, wala pa akong na-meet na tao na nagsabing worried sila sa akin.

“Ano ka ba, Summer! Natural lang na mag-alala ka sa kaibigan mo,” sabi ni Mirden na sumeryoso ang ekspresyon ng mukha. Jamie seemed to be hurt but… Why should I care? Wala naman akong sinabi na mag-alala sila.

“That is your opinion, people! Just because we share rooms, it doesn’t mean that we’re already friends.” Nakita kong tila nasaktan sila sa sinabi ko. Now, bakit parang may vague feeling akong nararamdaman, like guilt? FRIENDS--- certainly, is a strange word to me. I grabbed my jeans and a t-shirt mula sa closet at tumakbo sa bathroom for a quick shower. Punishment. I still got that damn punishment to attend to! Nang matapos na

ang kailangan kong gawin sa banyo, lumabas na ako at pinatuyo ang buhok. They were still there, watching me. Ano bang problema nila? Tsk.

“May nawawalang estudyante simula kagabi at hindi pa siya nakikita hanggang ngayon. Nag-alala lang kami na baka may nangyari na ring masama sa’yo,” seryosong wika ni Jamie. Lumapit si Mirden at pinakita ang flyers na may larawan ng isang pamilyar na lalaki. Cute guy with nerd glasses… uh. Siya yung lalaki sa English class ko na tinanong ako nung second day… katabi ko siya noon… and whoah! He’s missing?

“Baka daw may nakakita sa kanya,” seryosong sabi ni Mirden.

“I didn’t see him,” tipid kong sagot. Nakaka-bother ang pagiging seryoso nila.

“At parang nagiging weird ang faculty at student council. They seemed to be talking in hushed voices. Parang tinatago nila ang detalye.” Natahimik saglit si Mirden na parang nag-iisip. Her nerd glasses--- well sa tingin ko--- it gives her the most personality.

“Kailangan ko nang umalis. At saka baka napagpasyahan lang ng missing student na yun na ayaw na niyang pumasok sa school kaya siya umalis.” Well, I hope that will ease their panic about the missing student.

“Alam kong kaya mong alagaan ang sarili mo dahil ikaw na ang pinaka-cool na taong nakilala ko… well, next to Lelouch Lamperogue… pero wala namang mawawala kung mag-iingat ka di ba?” Biglang nasabi ni Mirden na ikinatigil ko. Pareho ko silang tiningnan. Wala pa ring nagbago. They seemed so serious. At hindi ako sanay na ganito sila. Bakit parang gusto kong makita na maingay at makulit si Jamie while Mirden is trying her corny jokes which they both laugh at hindi dahil sa joke kundi dahil corny ito.

“Kaya ko ang sarili ko,” sagot ko at tumalikod sa kanila. Halos nararamdaman ko ang frustration nila sa likod ko. Lumapit si Jamie sa akin at tinapik ang balikat ko. I flinched. Wala kasing nangangahas na hawakan ako dati. It’s either I push them away or I’ll kick their faces. And now that they are acting like this… Akala ko kay Autumn ko lang iyon

mararamdaman… But I have to admit that it felt nice… And then I shrugged it off. Napamaang lang si Jamie nang humarap ako sa kanya. Agad rin siyang nakabawi at saka bumuntong-hininga.

“Okay lang yun, Summer. Wala naman talaga kaming paki-elam kung hindi kaibigan ang turing mo sa amin, eh. Pero wala ka nang magagawa dahil kaibigan na ang turing namin sa’yo. So kung kailangan mo ng tulong…”

“Tama na. Kailangan ko nang umalis,” putol ko sa sasabihin niya at lumabas na ng kwarto. If that was not one of the most awkward situations! Pero kahit ganun, tila nakaramdam ako ng kaunting relief nang makalayo ako. No. I’m not taking my guard down. I never will.

Nagmadali ako sa paglabas ng dorm at tumakbo patungo sa gym. Naabutan ko ang ilang mga estudyante na naglalaro ng basketball. Well, specifically Van and his thugs. At nakita ko rin si Trinity na pinagmamasdan ang bawat galaw ni Van. Stalker! Martyr! Pathetic! Gusto ko siyang sigawan sa mukha lalo na at naalala kong hindi man lang ako nakaganti sa pagsampal niya sa akin kagabi pero mas pinili kong maging normal lang at lumapit sa kanya. Saka ko lang napansin na katabi niya ang isang matandang babaeng naka-uniporme ng janitress.

Sa wakas napansin ako ni Trinity and she smiled at me. Well, it seemed like a real smile pero alam kong isa iyong fake. I just rolled my eyes at her.

“You’re late, Leondale. Dapat kanina ka pa nag-start na maglinis. But anyway, this is Ophelia. Kapag may kailangan kang mga tools, tell her. And don’t bother asking her for help dahil sinabi ko sa kanya na you should do it on your own. And don’t you dare make moves on boys. Ayokong makarinig ng mga rumors after this punishment. If you’re doing that on your previous school then---”

“You can shut your big mouth now dahil sa tingin ko, ikaw yung kanina pang gustong gumawa ng move.” And I glanced on the players sa court. She blushed. “So if you’re talking stuff about yourself then you better face a mirror,” I continued sarcastically at tumalikod sa kanya at sa ilang nakarinig. The perfect girl deserves a little humiliation.

Sumunod si Ophelia sa akin, or I'd rather call her Miss Ophelia, since she's quite older than me. Nakarating kami sa Girls' comfort and locker room. It's Sunday so konti lang ang sporty girls na pumunta sa gym kaya medyo malinis ang area. Sa tingin ko ay mas gugustuhin nilang mag-stay sa dorm or humingi ng permission para makalabas ng school than to visit here. Well, aside from those cheerleaders na nagpa-practice sa labas at sa mga pathetic fans ng mga naglalaro sa court… which inlcudes the SC President.

"Warm up mo pa lang ito. Pero mag-ready ka na sa pagpunta mo sa Boy's area. Magulo doon at makalat. At gusto man kitang tulungan, ipinagbawal ni Trinity. Ano ba naman kasing parusa yan. Hindi pa ba sapat na umalis ng Montello High ang huling estudyanteng gumawa nito?" Wika ni Miss Ophelia. Meron na palang naparusahan na tulad nito at base sa pagkakarinig ko, hindi maganda ang kinalabasan. Sinimulan ko na ang paglilinis… mas mukha siyang orientation and training dahil si Miss Ophelia ang halos gumagawa ng lahat at itinuturo niya lang sa akin kung paano para magawa ko iyon nang maayos sa Boy's C.R. and locker room.

Nang matapos na namin ang paglilinis sa Girls' area, nagpaalam na ako sa babae at tahimik na nagtungo sa Boy's area. Sana lang magawa ko nang tama ang mga ibinilin niya… No. Mas dapat kong hilingin na sana mahaba ang pasensya ko upang matagalan ang paglilinis.

May mga dala akong cleaning tools sa magkabila kong kamay kung kaya naman nang nasa harap ko na ang hindi naka-lock na pintuan, imbes na itulak ko ay sinipa ko nang malakas and…

Tadaah!!!!

Half-naked dudes wandering around the room, water-splashing sounds, some are busy in the cubicle and the others are getting dressed or maybe undressing. WHATEVER! The worst part is, they all stopped what they are doing and are now looking at me. Marahil nagtataka sila kung ano'ng ginagawa ko sa Boy's area.

Tahimik akong pumasok at nagsimulang lagyan ng 'Cleaning' signs ang mga cubicles. Tama si Miss Ophelia, ilang bagyo ba ang napagdaanan nito?

Mabuti na lang naka-mask ako or else… malay ko ba kung nakamamatay ang amoy dito.

“Hey, babe, are you looking for me?” Tanong ng isang maskuladong lalaki. Probably a senior student. Hindi ko iyon pinansin at nagpatuloy sa ginagawa. Surely, this won’t be easy.

“Are you a freshman? Mukhang napa-trouble ka, ah para magkaroon ng task na ganyan,” wika ng isa pa subalit hindi pa rin ako sumagot. Mas mabilis akong matapos, mas mabuti. Wala akong balak makipag-chit-chat sa kanila. Subalit mukhang hindi iyon ganun kadali. Hindi ko naramdaman ang paglapit ng muscled guy na unang nagsalita kanina at nagulat ako nang may umakbay sa akin. I stiffed and counted 1, 2, 3…

“Lumayo ka,” kalmado kong sabi. Masyado na akong nababadtrip sa punishment na ito at hindi makakatulong kung daragdagan nila!

“But why, babe? Am I making you uncomfortable?” Sagot ng lapastangan.

Hinawakan ko nang mahigpit ang walis sa kamay ko at inihampas ko sa kanya. It landed on his face, at napaurong siya.

“Yes. Too uncomfortable!” Galit kong sabi.

“Bitch!” Sigaw niya at sumenyas sa mga kasama niya. Huli ko nang na-realize na napapalibutan na nila ako. Oh no, cheesecake! Trouble again. Pero masyado silang madami at hindi ko nagugustuhan ang mga kislap sa mga mata nila. Perverts!

“I think she’s the new kid,” sabi ng isa sa kanila.

“Oo. Siya nga. Wow. She’s really got some nerve to mess with us!” Nakangising sabi ng isa at lumapit sa akin. Nang malapit na ang distansya namin, hinawakan ko ang balikat niya and I kneed his family jewels. He cried in pain. Bye-bye, future babies! Nang lumuhod siya sa sakit, I found an opening and ran for the door. Hinabol pa rin nila ako and now, I think I’m trapped! And the only room to escape to is their locker room. Agad kong tinungo iyon at nagdasal na sana walang tao doon.

I entered the room… I found no one… At wala rin akong makitang pwedeng pagtaguan bukod sa mga shower rooms na occupied. Naririnig ko na ang mga papalapit na yabag ng mga humahabol sa akin. Wala na akong choice. Pwede ko naman sigurong i-threat ang kung sino mang nasa shower room na pagtataguan ko… Oh, please… I tested the first two doors… locked… and the third…

Huminga ako nang malalim at pumasok sa ikatlong shower room. Naramdaman ko ang pagbagsak ng tubig mula sa shower. Nang isara ko ang pinto ay sya ring pagbukas ng pinto sa labas na sinundan ng mga yabag.

SAVED!!!

“What the f ck?!” Narinig kong curse ng pamilyar na boses.

“Shut up or I’ll slit your throat or---” Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko dahil tila naubusan ako ng dugo at namutla nang tuluyan. I can see myself as a ghost now. Marahas niyang tinanggal ang mask sa mukha ko and I blushed… He’s naked. I know he is! But I dared myself not to look down! I swear I didn’t! I didn’t see anything! I just saw his handsome face and I didn’t dare look away from that! I swear I’m not a perve and I just caught a glimpse of his abs, muscled chest, biceps and that intriguing line… Oh no! Kill me! NOW!

“Summer?” Nakakunot-noong sabi ni Van. I opened my mouth to defend myself from breaking in but he snaked his left arm into my waist to pull me closer. Nanlaki ang mga mata ko nang i-lock niya ang pinto and then he covered my mouth with his right hand.

“Shh…” Bulong niya at saka ko narinig ang mga humahabol sa akin.

“Where the hell is she?!”

“I-check mo yung mga shower rooms!”

Kinatok nila ang unang pinto at narinig ko ang pagbukas niyon. “Are you guys gay?” Tinig na pamilyar. Makki Sison. So the Black Governments decided to take a shower here after their basketball game.

“May hinahanap lang kaming chicks, Makki,” sagot ng isa.

“Talaga? May chicks dito? Baka itong katabing pinto ko. 36-24-36! Sexy!” Sagot ni Makki at narinig ko ang pagsara ng pinto. Kinatok nila ang pangalawang pinto.

“Babes. Labas ka na. Let’s continue what we are doing.” Uh. The pervert guy na umakbay sa akin kanina. Muli kong narinig ang pagbukas ng pinto. At ang boses ng tinatawag nilang ‘babe’.

“May kailangan kayo sa akin?” Ethan Montreal’s cold and calm voice. Natahimik saglit ang mga nasa labas.

“Pasensya na, Vice President,” tila kinakabahang boses ng isa sa mga humahabol sa akin. Quit now, boys! There are monsters behind these doors. This is a horror story! Nakarinig ako ng isa pang katok sa pinto at iyon na ang kinaroroonan namin. Umiling si Van at nagsalita.

“Tatlong segundo. Gusto niyo ba talagang pagbuksan ko kayo?” Baritono at may death threat na tinig ni Van. Kahit ako nagka-goose bumps. Hindi ko na narinig pang sumagot ang mga nasa labas at tanging ang mabibilis nilang yabag paalis ang naiwan mula sa kaangasan nila. Huminga ako nang malalim as a sigh of relief.

“Having pleasure at this moment?” Nakangising tanong ni Van and I blushed even more… Me… with Van… in the shower room… and he’s naked…

Pinalo ko ang kamay niyang tumatakip sa bibig ko at saka tinulak siya palayo.

“Too much for being in hell with a devil,” I snapped.

“You mean, hot as hell?” At kinuha niya ang nakasabit na tuwalya upang takpan ang dapat takpan. Nagawa pa niyang mag-smirk.

“Jerk!” I shouted at him. Bad thing dahil mukhang na-rattle ang mga nasa katabing shower room. Yung tipong magnitude 5.2 na lindol.

“Meron talagang chicks dito?!” Bulalas ni Makki.

Bumukas naman ng malakas ang katabi naming pinto at kasunod nun ay ang sunud-sunod at forceful na pagkatok sa pintuan ng shower kung nasaan kami ni Van.

“Van, Let her out.” Si Ethan. “Summer, Lumabas ka na riyan. Wala na sila,” may authority niyang sabi. Siguro dahil Student Council siya kaya may concern din siya sa welfare ng mga estudyante dito. Ugh.

Ibinukas ni Van ang pinto at walang-sabing hinila ako ni Ethan palabas.

“Why are you here?” Tanong ni Ethan.

“I was doing my punishment but I had to escape those pigs,” sagot ko. Nakita kong lumabas si Makki sa gilid ng mga mata ko pero nanatili lang siyang nanonood sa amin.

Tumingin si Ethan kay Van. Nakatuwalya lang din siya at may ibubuga rin ang body figure kay Van. Ugh. Enough! But they’re really gorgeous and… mabango. Ugh! But Van is still evil… as ever.

“At naisipan mong magtago kasama si Van sa shower room?” Tanong ni Ethan. Bakit ba parang kailangan kong mag-explain sa kaniya?

“Wala akong choice. Sarado yung ibang pinto. Dapat ba hinayaan ko na lang yung mga baboy na ma-corner ako?” Sagot ko.

“Why so protective, Ethan?” Tila may ibang pakahulugang sabi ni Van. This annoying jerk!

Pareho kaming napatingin rito--- well, in Ethan’s case, parang kinausap niya ito sa mata.

“I’m the Vice President of the Student Council” seryoso at simpleng sabi ni Ethan. He was merely stating the obvious pero napapansin kong may ibang nais pa siyang iparating kay Van at nag-iingat siya dahil sa presensiya ko. Ugh. Hindi rin naman ako dapat maging interesado sa dapat nilang pag-usapan, eh. Akma akong tatalikod subalit hinawakan ni Ethan ang braso ko.

“Saan ka pupunta?” Tanong niya habang nagsusuot ng t-shirt.

“Kailangan ko nang umalis at ipagpatuloy ang paglilinis,” tangi kong sagot at binawi ang braso ko mula sa pagkakahawak niya. Tumalikod ako nang akma na siyang magsusuot ng basketball shorts.

“Sa tingin ko, kailangan kitang samahan habang ginagawa yan. Baka makita ka ng mga iyon at kung ano’ng gawin sa’yo,” wika ni Ethan.

“Kaya na niya ang sarili niya, Montreal,” sabat ni Van na ikinataas ng kilay ko. Buti naman at napapansin niya rin pala na hindi ako yung ordinaryong mahinang babae.

“Tama siya. Nakakaya ko nga ang pesteng yan, sila pa kaya?” Sang-ayon ko habang itinuturo si Van.

“Ano’ng tinawag mo sa akin?!” Sigaw ni Van. Pero bago pa man ako makasagot ay hinila na ako ni Ethan palayo.

Isang masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko kay Van bago sumara ang pinto. Tahimik lang si Ethan habang naglalakad kami patungong Boy’s Comfort Room. Now, I wonder kung ano’ng iniisip niya. Nang pumasok kami sa C.R., agad kong nakita ang mga humahabol sa akin kanina na tila inaabangan ang pagbabalik ko.

“Subukan niyo siyang galawain at sisiguraduhin kong hindi niyo na nanaisin pang maalala ang araw na ito,” kalmado ngunit halata ang pagbabanta na sabi ni Ethan. Hindi sumagot ang mga naroon at tahimik silang lumabas.

Ipinagpatuloy ko ang paglilinis samantalang si Ethan ay walang imik naman na nagmamasid. Ano bang problema ng isang ito? Sobrang tahimik. Parang namiss ko na tuloy ang kakulitan nila Jamie at Mirden. Ilang minuto pa ang lumipas at hindi pa rin siya nagsasalita. Kaya naman hindi ko na napigilan ang sarili ko. Fine. Kung tahimik akong tao, mukhang mas wirdo pa ang isang ito.

“What are you thinking?” Tanong ko. Uh. At talagang hindi na ako nagpaliguy-ligoy pa. Dahil gusto ko talagang malaman kung ano ang iniisip niya.

“Bakit ka nandito sa Montello High?” Tanong niya. Ano bang isasagot ko sa kaniya? Na wala akong choice? Mukhang mali ang desisyon kong kausapin siya, ah.

“Wala palang kwenta ang iniisip mo,” sagot ko na lang. If only I could read your mind…

“Dapat ibang school na lang ang pinasukan mo. There are a lot of schools better than Montello High. Hindi ganun kasaya ang mga nangyayari dito. You’ll find better people outside this place,” wika niya.

“For a Student Council VIP, you sure are so proud of your school,” sarkastikong nasabi ko.

“As a leader, you must not conceal the truth,” nakangiting sagot ni Ethan. That sheepish smile! Why, I’ll admit, he looks so cool with that. Dapat sa halip na laging seryoso, lagi syang ngumiti. Pero bakit pakiramdam ko, nagtatalo ang karakter ng isang ito?

“And to be a leader, you have to wear a mask,” sabi ko naman tungkol sa sinabi niya.

“A mask?” Tanong ni Ethan.

Tumango ako. Wow, we’re actually having a conversation! “Kailangan mong maging kalmado at composed. Which is actually not what you’re feeling right now. That’s why I think it sucks,” sagot ko. Nawala ang ngiti sa mga labi niya at saglit siyang natahimik. Akala ko hindi na siya muling magsasalita pa subalit muli kong narinig ang kalmado niyang boses.

“Tama ka. Alam mo bang gustung-gusto kong saktan ang mga tao dito kanina? Pero dahil may tungkulin ako sa school at sa walang kwentang kaayusan nito… Uh! Kaya gustung-gusto ko pag may gang fights kami, eh.”

I’m a little shocked. Is he opening himself up to me? Revealing what’s behind his mask? Well, kahit paano, parang medyo naintindihan ko na ang mysterious guy na ito.

“And Van is a little uncontrolled now,” tahimik niyang dagdag.

“Why is he uncontrolled? I mean, I know he’s a devil and---” Tsk. Bakit ba nasama sa usapang ito ang isang iyon? I’m not into gossips. Gossiping with Ethan? About Van? Ha! Funny. Darn!

“You don’t know him that much,” wika niya.

Umiling lang ako. Well, lahat ng tao kapag naja-judge will defend themselves by talking about their hidden sides. In this case, I can tell that Ethan is really loyal to the Black Government’s leader. Pinili kong hindi na lang sumagot at tinapos na ang dapat linisin. Mamaya ko na lang siguro lilinisin ang Locker room. Hindi naman siguro kasalanan kung magpapahinga ako ng sandali sa dorm, di ba?

“Have lunch with me,” biglang sabi ni Ethan na ikinalingon ko sa kaniya. The Gangster Student Council Vice President is… asking me for lunch. Issue yan kaya mas mabuting tanggihan.

“Ayoko,” tipid kong sagot.

“Why not?” Tanong niya na mukhang nadisappoint sa hindi ko pagpayag.

“Cause I’m already tired and I can’t handle stuffs like being with you anymore,” muli kong sagot. Well, ayoko munang mapa-trouble ngayon lalo pa at ang korni pala ng punishment ng Student Council.

“Are you always this sarcastic?” Nakangiti niyang tanong. I swear, that smile of his, it’s… magical. Hindi ko mapigilan ang sarili kong tumitig lang sa mukha niya. His smiles are brilliant compared to Van’s evil grin.

“What do you want?” Balik-tanong ko.

“I already told you. Lunch.” At bago pa ako muling makasagot ay hinila na niya ako palabas. Mukhang wala naman na rin akong choice kaya agad ko

na lang iniwan ang gloves ko bago sinabayan ang malalaking hakbang ni Ethan. Curse tall people!

Ugh. Mukhang mahaba-haba pa ang araw na ito!

[8] Chapter 8: The Punishment (Part 2)

Author's Note:

Up again! Yay! So this is my apology--- a double chapter update treat! Haha. And for those who waited, for those who pressured, for those who became a fan, for the votes, for the comments and messages and all the reads, SALAMUCH!!! Really means a lot to me. It's like, 'Hey, Dork. Welcome back to the city!' Haha. And I still miss the sea. :(

Oh, well. pulls up the mat I'll shut up now. ;-)

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 8: The Punishment (Part 2)

Sa cafeteria, nararamdaman ko sa likod ko ang mga sulyap na ibinibigay sa aming dalawa ng mga estudyante habang pumipili kami ng pagkain. I don't really like and need attention, especially right now na mukhang kalat na sa buong Montello High na pinarusahan akong maging Janitress. Hindi naman talaga kasi ako kasama sa riot kagabi sa 6th floor para mapatawan ng punishment katulad ng mga gangster na nagko-community service sa labas. The president just can't get over with what I did with Van. At dahil nga sa sinuntok ko ang impaktong yun---

"Ano'ng gusto mong kainin?" Ethan asked.

Yeah, another thing is I'm with his gangster friend. Hindi ba dapat hindi niya ako pinapansin o dapat ay pinepeste niya rin ang buhay ko since apparently, their leader and I hated each other?

"Pizza. Cake, slice of Chocolate mousse. And that spicy fried chicken and rice." Today has been so stressful at kailangan kong mag-vent sa mga

pagkain. Good part of me is, kahit kainin ko ang pagkain ng buong mundo, hindi ako tumataba.

“Wow. Pang-isang linggo na ba ‘to?” Ayan na naman ang ngiti niya habang inilalagay sa tray ang mga sinabi kong items. He will definitely need a second tray.

“You’re going to pay, right? I’m just simply taking advantage of your generosity,” walang emosyong sagot ko. Pero kung wala siyang balak na ilibre ako, kaya ko namang bayaran ang mga in-order ko. Yung nga lang, kailangan kong tipirin ang sarili ko mamayang dinner. Mukhang may point ang sinabi niyang good for one week ang gusto kong kainin.

“Mukhang may tatalo na kay Makki sa pagiging food monster,” aniya habang binabayaran sa counter ang in-order namin. He got seafood pasta and hawaiian pizza for his own. And also a Mountain Dew and a pack of cigarettes. Hmmm…. Appetizer? Parang wala namang tinitinda sa cafeteria na yosi, saan niya kaya iyon nakuha?

Dumiretso na kami sa bakanteng mesa and that was the one in the middle, which, in my opinion, is the most uncomfortable place at the moment dahil lahat yata ng atensyon--- Black Government, Dark Monarch, gangster or not, weak or imba--- ay nasa amin. Why am I getting too much of this? Agad kong nilantakan ang pagkain ko sa mesa para lang makaiwas sa tingin ng marami at sa mga nakaka-conscious na sulyap ni Ethan.

“Hey, Blonde Chinito. Bakit mo pala ako nilibre ng lunch?” Tanong ko.

“I treat you to dinner on your second day here. So I think there’s nothing wrong with lunch. And I’m looking forward to breakfast, too,” he said. So, tell me again, why is he being nice?

“Sa tingin ko, you are a really complicated person. A leader and gangster as well. Both lies at the opposite ends. Naiisip ko tuloy kung meron ka bang kailangan sa akin.” He’s too nice and I started to become suspiscious. Because I don’t trust people easily, lalo na yung mga kilala ko lang sa pangalan. Medyo nawala ang ngiti ni Ethan pero agad rin iyong nanumbalik.

“Do I have to need something from you para lang maging kaibigan ka?” Tanong niya. Nagkibit-balikat lang ako.

“I don’t trust gangsters simply because they are gangsters.”

“But I’m also the Student Council Vice President.”

“I also don’t fully trust leaders. They’re corrupt.”

He stared at me, open-mouthed. Hopefully ay mag-give up na siya sa attempt niyang kaibiganin ako. Subalit matapos ang ilang sandaling katahimikan ay muli na naman siyang nagsalita.

“If I have a mask, then you have walls. Thick and high walls no one can invade.” Napahinto ako sa pagkain at tumingin sa kaniya. Is he right? Am I building walls? Am I being so protective of myself? I don’t know. Wala naman sa isip ko na isara ang sarili ko. It’s just that I learned not to believe in people and not to trust them. Hindi na ako sumagot at ipinagpatuloy muli ang pagkain. Pretend that he is not there…. Doing that will make this easier.

“Summer, stay away from the dark… From the Nightwoods…. From the gangsters.” Bakas ang kaseryosohan sa tinig niya at nawala na rin ang nakakasilaw na ngiti sa labi niya.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” sagot ko. He’s so full of authority but still, I’m not used on someone ordering me. Bakit ba kasi ang galing niyang mag-shift ng moods?

“Hindi mo ba alam kung gaano kadelikado ang ginawa mong pagpunta sa Nightwoods noong gabing nagkaroon ng sunog? Sa tingin mo ba mapoprotektahan ka ni Jin Cast sa mga armadong taong nakita ninyo? And now, a student is missing…” He was so serious that it’s really hard not to pay attention to him.

“Is it that bad?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you telling me this?”

“Because you’re the new kid. Feisty. And unfortunately, too curious,” wika niya. Sabay dagdag ng, “And I’m worried about you… as the Student Council Vice President.” Yeah, right. He’s a leader.

“I can handle and take care of myself,” kalmado kong sagot. Isang estudyante ang lumapit sa amin, specifically kay Ethan. Napatigil kami sa pag-uusap.

“Ethan, kailangan ka sa Student Council Room,” bungad nito. Tahimik na inexcuse ni Ethan ang sarili at tahimik na naglakad palayo kasama ang estudyante. Ganun lang nagdaan ang lunch namin at parang walang nangyari. Pero kung iisipin mo, kakaiba rin talaga ito. Ang weird ng mga nagawa naming mapag-usapan.

Tumayo na rin ako at naglakad pabalik sa gym. Uh. Trouble again. Naroon na naman kaya ang mga mokong na humabol sa akin kanina? At naroon pa kaya ang pesteng Van na yun? That self-conceited bragging idiot who thought he’s the best thing that ever existed! I wonder kung bakit magkaibigan sila ni Ethan.

One thing is for sure, oras na tumuntong ako ulit sa loob ng locker room ng boys, gulo ang papasukan ko. Wala akong balak humingi ng tulong kay Blonde Chinito pero kung sana man lang ay sinamahan na niya ako hanggang sa matapos ko ang punishment na ito, then I’ll be secretly thankful. Either way, I need to do this. Meron pa ring naglalaro sa gym and I recognized them as the Black Government. Nakita ko rin si Makki on the far side of the bleachers flirting with three cheerleaders. This womanizer! Dumiretso ako sa Locker Room at nakita kong may mga ilan pang students ang naroon. And a couple of girls making out with a guy on the--- WHAT THE HELL!

Kailan pa in-allow ang babae dito? Well, bukod sa case kong isang tagalinis. I need to cover my eyes! My innocent eyes! Tumalikod na lang ako at humarap sa pinto habang halos lahat sila ay nakatingin sa akin. Paano ko sisimulan ang paglilinis kung may live porn sa paligid? Napatalon ako sa marahas na pagbukas ng pinto at tumambad ang pigura ni Van. At mukhang sasali pa sa immoral party ang isang ito. Naglakad siya palapit at nilampasan ako. Pero nagulat ako sa sunod niyang sinabi.

“Kayong lahat! Labas! May damit o wala! Tapos o hindi! O ipapasok ko ang bawat isa sa inyo sa ospital!” Sigaw niya. Agad na nagsilabasan ang mga naroon with the two whining sluts on their towels. Nang mawala na ang mga tao sa room ay sinimulan ko na muli ang paglilinis.

“Ang sabi ko lumabas lahat o gusto mo talagang masaktan?” May pagbabantang sabi ni Van. Uh. I thought he was insconspisciously trying to help me. He’s really a devil.

“Wala akong paki-alam kung bakit mo pinalabas ang mga taong yun dito pero meron akong kailangang tapusin. At saktan mo man ako o hindi, I don’t really care,” matapang kong sagot. Ano bang problema niya? Kasalanan niyang lahat kung bakit ganito ang ginagawa ko ngayon. Kahit kailan talaga, peste siya.

“Stupid, hard-headed bitch!” Galit niyang sabi at sinipa ang isang canned Coke na naiwan. The liquid spilled on the floor. Bullsh t!!! Kailangan ba talagang gawin niyang mas mahirap ang lahat para sa akin? What did I even do to deserve this? I grabbed the mop and handed it to him. Confused, tiningnan lang niya ang mop sa kamay ko.

“Alam mo, this is all your fault. At sa tingin ko it would be fair if you have your share of the punishment,” inis kong wika sa kaniya habang tila hindi naman siya makapaniwala sa narinig niya.

“Inuutuusan mo ba akong maglinis dito?” Nanggigilalas na tanong niya. Kung gayon ay hindi pala siya sanay na inuutusan siya or as in never pa siyang naglinis sa tanang buhay niya. Well, ano pa nga bang aasahan mo sa isang leader ng gang na mula sa wealthy mafia family? Napaka-nonsense talaga ng mga titulong nakakabit sa pangalan niya.

“Hindi. Dahil sa ayaw at sa gusto mo, maglilinis ka. You really don’t get it, ha? This is all your fault,” inis kong sabi. Pag kausap ko ang impaktong ito, lagi na lang akong paulit-ulit ng sinasabi.

“It’s not my fault if you are making your own life miserable. If you know better, you should have stayed away from trouble with me and the other gangs. Maybe then, you’ll live at peace at your senior year. But you are a

brainless bitch who so stupidly chose to mess with us!” Pasigaw niyang sagot. His voice boomed inside the four corners of the locker room.

Nakakairita talaga ang lahat ng lumalabas sa bibig ng lalaking ito. “You don’t have to shout on me, Devil! If you are frustrated over something, wag mong ibaling sa akin!” I shouted back. This is getting way worse. Wala talagang sense makipag-usap sa gag ng ito. Ipinagpatuloy ko na lang muli ang paglilinis. Much better kung maaga na lang akong mawawala rito at mawala sa paningin ko ang pagmumukha niya. Nakasandal lang si Van sa full-length na salamin at nagyoyosi. Ugh. He’ll die young with smoking which will be good. Let him die. Pero pag naubos ang pasensya kong kakarampot lang ang supply sa katawan ko simula’t-sapul, he’ll die now.

“Bakit mo kasama si Ethan kaninang lunch?” Muli siyang nagsalita. This time, he didn’t shout. He’s just so damn serious that it bothered me.

“Ano bang paki-alam mo?” Mataray kong sagot. We’re definitely not friends kaya hindi ko kailangang mag-explain. Itinapon niya sa kalilinis ko lang na sahig ang natira niyang sigarilyo at kumuha muli ng panibago at sinindihan iyon. Isang masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko sa kaniya. Siya na yata ang pinakawalang kwentang taong nakilala ko.

“Sumagot ka ng maayos, Leondale,” may pagbabanta sa tinig na sinabi niya. Lagi na lang niya akong pinagbabantaan. Ina-ano ko ba siya? Di ba siya naman itong wala sa lugar? Tss! But I just glared at him at dinust pan ang ikinalat niyang sigarilyo sa sahig. Hindi naman niya ako alipores para sumunod sa mga inuutos niya. I thought he’ll finally just let me finish on what I am doing but I was shocked when he pulled my arm and pushed me against the full-length mirror. I’m actually surprised that it didn’t break dahil medyo malakas ang pagkakatulak niya sa akin. And I think I’m cornered with his hands on both sides of my head.

“What the hell is your problem?!!!” I shouted at his face. Napasigaw na ako sa gulat at sa inis. Sobrang bumibingo na sa pasensya ko ang isang ito. And he’s close… too close that I could feel his breath on my face. Strawberry mint with the mix of the smell of cigarettes… toxic.

“Why are you with Ethan?” Muli niyang tanong. Too uncomfortable. Ibinaling ko ang mukha ko sa kabilang gilid para lang huwag masalubong ang tingin niya.

“Wala akong balak sagutin ang tanong mo kung ganyan ang iyong attitude. You can ask him since you so obviously think that you’re superior to him,” kalmado kong sagot. But really, nagpapanic na ako inside. This person is too livid. Ibang-iba rin ang personality niya kay Ethan. Van is too dangerous.

“Alam mo bang nakaka-asar ang presensiya mo? At isa ka sa mga taong gusto kong mawala sa mundo. Kayang kaya kong ipahanap ang pamilya mo at ipapatay sila kung gugustuhin ko.” Tila nakaharap ko ang isang tunay na halimaw. Hindi ko alam kung bakas sa mukha ko ang takot na naramdaman ko nang banggitin niya ang pamilya ko. He’s not that serious, right?

“Y-you’re really a devil. Ano bang kailangan mo?” May kabang tanong ko.

“Ano’ng pinag-usapan niyo ni Ethan Montreal?”

Finally, nakuha ko na ang lakas ng loob upang humarap sa kaniya at titigan siya sa mata. His dark eyes are eternal abyss… like a black hole. And I don’t know the extent of the menace that lies behind those orbs. I gulped at the bitterness of my fear. Dang! I’m supposed to be fearless!

“Binalaan lang niya ako sa mga panganib na dala ng mga gangsters… ng Montello High!” Sagot ko. I just hoped na hindi halata sa boses ko o sa expression ko na I’m threatened. Natahimik siya saglit at tumingin lang sa akin. Now, this is more uncomfortable. I just wanted to escape .

“Are you scared of me?” Tanong niya.

“HELL, NO!” Was my answer too defensive? No, I hoped not.

“But I can smell fear in you.” He leaned down on me closer… closer that I closed my eyes because of the awkwardness of the situation. At sa ganoong tagpo nagbukas ang pinto at sa pagmulat ng mga mata ko ay nakita ko ang shocked na si Trinity.

Hindi naman lumingon rito si Van na tila alam na kung sino ang pumasok. Gayunpaman, awkward pa rin dahil masiyado siyang malapit.

“Ano’ng ibig sabihin nito?” I’m definitely surprised at how calm Trinity’s voice is. But the fury in her eyes betrayed her play. I think she doesn’t need to feel that way because if that’s jealousy, then it’s pointless. This devil just hates me and I loathe him, too. Itinulak ko si Van palayo. At parang walang nangyaring itinuloy ko ang paglilinis. These two have issues at hindi ako kasama roon. Wala rin naman akong balak makisawsaw.

“Get out of here, Trinity,” wika ni Van at kumuha ulit ng sigarilyo mula sa pakete. He’s a certified jerk! Trinity managed a smile for him and a frown when she glanced my way.

“As the president of the Student Council, I won’t let scandalous things happen in Montello High. So, Miss Leondale, will you stop seducing Van like what those other sluts do to catch his attention?”

Itinigil ko ang ginagawa ko at tumingin sa kanila. Pipiliin ko sanang magpretend na wala sila sa paligid pero mukhang hindi ko kayang palampasin ang imagination ni Trinity.

“So what does a slut like you do to seduce him?” Sarkastiko kong tanong na ikinapawi ng pang-beauty pageant niyang ngiti.

“Excuse me? Did you just call me a slut?” Mangha tanong ni Trinity. Ayoko talaga ng mga pa-inosenteng reaksiyon.

Simple ang naging sagot ko sa indifferent na tono. “Uh, yes? Cause I didn’t kiss him like you do. I don’t push myself to him like you do. And I don’t call him in the middle of the night begging to bring back the past like you do.” Huli na nang ma-realize ko ang mga salitang lumabas sa bibig ko.

Masamang tingin ang ipinukol sa akin ni Van habang tila hindi makapaniwala si Trinity sa kaniyang narinig mula sa akin.

“Paano mo nalaman yan? Magkasama kayo kagabi?” Shocked niyang tanong. Naghagilap naman agad ako ng sasabihin. Nakaligtas na nga ako

kay Ethan tungkol kagabi, ngayon pa ba ako mahuhuli?

“Well, he— he told me!” I stuttered. Napamaang naman si Van sa sinabi ko. Uh. Ano bang dapat sabihin ko, through discoveries? Napailing naman si Trinity.

“Hindi niya sasabihin sa isang baguhang tulad mo ang tungkol sa amin!” Wika ni Trinity. Nagkibit-balikat lang ako at itinuloy ang paglilinis. Medyo malapit na akong matapos kung hindi lang nila ako dinamay sa issue nila.

“Hey, bitch! If you dare talk to him again, I swear I---!” Wow! Mukhang nawala na ang poise at calmness ni Trinity. Bago pa niya matapos ang sasabihin niya ay hinila na siya sa braso palabas ni Van. He really do care for her. Buti at alam niyang kaya kong basagin ang maamong mukha ng babaeng iyon, konti na lang.

Hindi na sila bumalik pa hanggang sa natapos ako sa paglilinis. Malapit na ring magdinner kaya naman matapos kong linisin ang sarili ko, dumiretso na ako sa cafeteria. May ilang estudyanteng kumakain na o nakikipaghuntahan sa kanilang grupo. Nakita ko si Jin na seryosong nakikipag-usap kay Zach at mukhang hindi ako napansin. Uh, mabuti naman.

“Summer!” Lumingon ako sa pinagmulan ng boses at nakita ko sina Jamie, Mirden at Tyler. Mukhang nasasanay na ang freshman na iyon na bumarkada sa kanila, ah. Bumili lang ako ng chocolate drink at lasagna mula sa counter at nagtungo sa kinaroroonan nila.

“Hi, Summer. Ngayon ko lang nalaman na pinaglinis ka pala nila ng gym. Siguro pagod ka,” wika ni Tyler. Hindi ako sumagot at sinimulan ko na ang pagkain.

“Kung pwede nga lang sana tinulungan ka na namin,” ani Jaime.

“Dahil gusto mo lang makakita ng abs?” Tanong ni Mirden na tinugon naman ng masamang tingin ni Jaime.

“Baliw ka talaga! Tyler, May abs ka ba?” Naiilang na ngumiti si Tyler at napakamot ng ulo.

“Ah, I’m still working on it?” Jaime and Mirden rolled their eyes sa sagot ni Tyler. Ibig sabihin lang naman nun ay wala siyang ‘abs’. Pinahaba at pinasosyal pa ang statement. Teka, bakit usapang abs ito?

“So, tell me, Summer. Sino ang mga nakita mong may abs?” Tanong ni Jaime. Both girls are waiting for my answer while Tyler is just frowning.

“Black Goverment,” tipid kong sagot. Natahimik silang saglit with their crazy blank expression and then….

“For real?! Nakita mo yung abs nila?!” Jamie’s high pitch voice.

“Six packs? Eight packs?” So, even nerd-looking girls like Mirden like abs? Kung alam lang nilang I’ve been in contact with the abs and muscles of… nevermind. Mas mabuting hindi na lang nila malaman.

“Hindi ko alam. Dahil hindi ko masyadong pinagtutuunan ng atensiyon,” bored kong sagot.

“Hindi ka mahilig sa abs? Bakit ganun? Hindi ka ba normal na tao?” Tanong ni Jamie.

“She’s just unique and cool and bad-ass!” Sagot ni Tyler para sa akin and the boy winked at me. Napailing na lang ako. Hindi talaga ako mahilig sa…. abs? Uh, but it does not mean na wala siyang effect. Merong konti. Awkwardness and discomfort.

“Ayan ka na naman sa pagdiskarte mo sa crush mo!” Biro ni Mirden na ikinatawa nilang lahat. Wala naman akong reaksiyon sa hopeless crush situation ni Tyler. Muli sanang magsasalita si Tyler subalit natahimik ang lahat sa biglang pagpatay ng ilaw.

Dark… Too dark… And I’m a little scared dahil mukhang merong panganib sa dilim na ito. Wala bang emergency light ang school?

“Calm down, students. Walang magpapanic.” Tinig iyon ni Mr. Gueco, ang terrible Math teacher ko, mula sa di kalayuan.

“Brown out at walang reserved lights? Generators? Ngayong lang ito nangyari, ah,” mahinang wika ni Mirden. Out of nowhere, bigla kong naalala ang sunog sa boy’s dorm, ang mga armadong lalaki sa Nightwoods at ang sinabi ni Jin na sophisticated ang pagkakagawa ng electrical engineering design ng Montello High. Konektado kaya ito? Normal nga lang ang magka-black out, but Montello High is a prestigious and wealthy school, dapat meron nang ilaw ngayon from their reserved generators.

SUNOG. Magkakaroon ba ulit ng sunog? I started to tense and to panic subalit bago pa ako gumawa ng kung anuman ay biglang sumindi muli ang mga ilaw at muling lumiwanag. Bakas ang relief sa mga naroong estudyante. Kinalma ko na rin ang sarili ko.

“That was scary! Akala ko nasa scream movie---” Hindi na natapos ni Jamie ang nais sana niyang sabihin dahil isang malakas na tili ng estudyanteng babae mula sa labas ang pumainlanlang sa paligid. All students rushed outside, maging ang ilang faculty members na nasa cafeteria rin pala, at nakisabay na rin kami sa ibang estudyante. But I wished I didn’t. How I hate this curiousity. Dahil isang traumatic na tanawin ang nakita namin. I heard gasps and curses and sobs from a few people.

“Oh my God! It’s him!” Nanlalaki ang mga mata at shocked na wika ni Jamie. Napatutop naman ng kamay sa bibig si Mirden. Tyler was shocked, too. Nanlalamig naman ang buo kong katawan. Nangilabot…

Hindi ko alam kung blangko o shocked ang remehistro sa mukha ko. Naramdaman ko na lang ang pagkapit ni Tyler sa balikat ko.

There in front of all of us… It’s him. He’s dead. Battered, bloodied and full of open wounds. He’s lying there on the grassy ground… Cold and lifeless… Pero kaninang umaga lang… I just… uh! And now… he’s gone…

[9] Chapter 9: Mind Maze

Chapter 9: Mind Maze

Death could be this savage… so tragic. The dried blood on his white shirt and the dark-bruises and circles on his eyes indicated that it had been a hard death… He didn't just died. He'd been killed. Pero kaninang umaga lang ipinakalat ang flyers tungkol sa pagkawala niya. That cute, nerd-looking guy nung second day… is gone. How did it end up like this?

"Andrew Novou. Junior Student. Siya yung tinanong namin sa'yo kaninang umaga kung nakita mo. God! Sino'ng gagawa ng ganitong kabrutalan?!" Shocked pa rin na wika ni Jamie.

Tyler stiffed on my side at dahan-dahang humakbang palapit sa bangkay. Yumuko siya at may inabot sa leeg ng biktima. Isang kwintas… pero mas mukha siyang maliit na gintong kadena. Meron iyong square na gold-plated pendant na may nakaukit na isang maliit na silver angel at itim na rosas na may gintong tangkay. Hindi ko na nasilayan ang iba pang nakaukit sa pendant sapagkat nakalapit na ang mga taga-faculty at agad din iyong ibinaba ni Tyler.

"Del Valle! Wag mong hahawakan ang katawan ni Novou lalo't wala pa ang mga pulis! Kayong lahat, bumalik sa dorm niyo! Darating na rin ang mga awtoridad," seryosong wika ni Principal Steins. Walang imik at tila may takot sa ekspresyon niya na naglakad si Tyler palayo. Nilagpasan lang niya kami.

Kung ordinaryong pagkakataon lang ito, baka hinayaan ko na lang siya. Subalit may kakaiba sa ikinikilos ni Tyler, eh. Mabilis ko siyang sinundan at sumabay sa lakad niya. Naiwan naman sina Mirden at Jamie na mukhang hindi pa nakaka-get over sa senaryo.

"Tyler, saan ka pupunta?" Tanong ko. Hindi siya sumagot. Hinawakan ko ang braso niya upang tumigil siya sa paglalakad. "Ano'ng problema?" Muli kong tanong. Alam kong meron. At nararamdaman ko rin na tungkol ito sa natagpuang bangkay ni nerd guy. Kaya kung gusto kong makatulog sa gabi, kailangan ko iyong malaman.

“Kailangan kong makausap si Kuya Van,” seryoso niyang sagot. I frowned. Ano namang kinalaman ng devil na yun? Hindi kaya…

“What? Is he the killer?” Tanong ko. I don’t know pero parang may vague feeling akong naramdaman nang tanungin ko iyon. Yung tila hindi ko matanggap… or hindi ako makakapayag. Ewan.

“Hindi… Hindi ko alam. Basta kailangan ko siyang makita,” tila naguguluhan din na sagot ni Tyler. He seems stressed. Ano kayang iniisip niya? Muli siyang naglakad. Tinatahak namin ang Boy’s dorm.

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin? Ano bang kinalaman ni Van dito?” Tanong ko na humabol sa kaniyang paglalakad.

“Yung kwintas na suot ni Andrew Novou… Isa iyong Freniere Mafia Crest. Simbolo iyon ng mga Mafia ng mga Freniere. Isa lang ang ibig sabihin nito, pinasok na rin nila ang Montello,” sagot ni Tyler.

Mafia… Van Freniere. Of course, I know the Mafia thing pero--- Hindi ko namalayan na nasa pinto na pala kami ng Boy’s dorm at isang humaharurot na sports car ang lumagpas sa amin papuntang main gate. Natagpuan namin si Makki na nasa labas at hinahatid ng tanaw ang kotse. Agad na lumapit sa kaniya si Tyler.

“Kuya Makki… Si Kuya Van?” Tanong niya. Nagkibit-balikat ang mukhang anime bishie at inginuso ang lumalabas na ng gate na kotse.

“Alam na niya ang nangyari sa cafeteria kaya dali-dali niyang pinuntahan si Tres,” wika ni Makki. Ngumiti siya ng mapansin ako. Still using his damn charms, huh. Can I just be an exception from those flirty smiles? “Dinala mo si Cute Girl dito? Ihatid mo na siya sa dorm niya. Delikado na ang sitwasyon kaysa sa sinasabi ng faculty na kalma lang.”

“Can someone explain things to me?” Tanong ko sapagkat naguguluhan ako. I got small hints from their statements pero hindi sapat at hindi pa rin sigurado. Ano bang kinalaman dito ni Van at ng Freniere Mafia?

“No. It’s too dangerous.” Nawala na ang playfulness sa mukha ni Makki. People are obviously, uncomfortably serious. Is it getting worse?

“Pero---”

“Summer, please,” paki-usap ni Tyler. Is it really that dangerous?

“Si Andrew Novou… pinatay ba siya ng mafia nina Van?” Tanong ko. Hindi ko talaga mapigilan ang curiousity ko. Pero meron nang namatay, kahit sino naman siguro ay gustong malaman ang detalye. Bukod pa doon, issue ito ng kaligtasan namin, hindi ba?

“Tyler, ako na lang ang maghahatid kay Summer sa dorm niya. At ikaw, pumasok ka na. Hindi ko alam kung mako-contact mo si Van pero subukan mo pa rin. Alam kong may magagawa ka para dito,” wika ni Makki at hinila ang braso ko. Magpoprotesta sana ako subalit tumalikod na si Tyler at pumasok sa dorm.

“These past few days, why am I always being dragged?” Wala sa loob na nasambit ko sa sarili. Narinig naman iyon ni Makki and he let out a laugh.

“Tell me, Summer, sinu-sino ba ang nag-iwan ng fingerprints sa brasong ito?” Muli nang bumalik ang carefree attitude ni Makki. Parang hindi siya naging serious as death kanina, ah.

“Hoy, ikaw! Ipaliwanag mo nga sa akin ang nangyayari,” inis na sabi ko. Ayoko talaga ng feeling na parang left out ako. Hinila ko din ang braso ko mula sa kaniya.

“Nagtatanong ka kung bakit palagi kang kinakaladkad? Ang tigas kasi ng coconut shell mo.” At ginulo niya ang buhok ko. I glared at him and hopelessly combed my hair with my fingers.

“Makki, just tell me, okay?”

“No way. It’s strictly parental guidance and you’re just a kid.” Hindi ako nakapagpigil at sinuntok ko siya sa balikat. Take note na hindi iyon mahinang suntok dahil nafu-frustrate na talaga ako.

“Argh! I’m not a kid!!!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya. I’m so tired of him treating me like a fragile, little girl!

“If you’re not a kid, then you shouldn’t be asking why you shouldn’t know anything,” sagot ni Makki habang hinihimas ang nasuntok na balikat.

“Why the hell shouldn’t I know anything?!” Sigaw kong muli. Hindi ba ako makakakuha ng matinong sagot? Nawala ang ngiti ni Makki.

“Sa tingin mo ba na kapag nakaharap mo ang Mafia, bubugbugin ka lang nila? Na bukas makakalimot din sila? Gusto mo bang matulad kay Andrew Novou? Malamang nakita mo na siguro ang hitsura niya---”

“Kung ganun, Mafia nga ang may kagagawan nun?” Natahimik si Makki at tumingin sa madilim na paligid. What? They’ve got spies here, too?

“Summer, just drop it off. Kanina lang nangyari, may conclusion ka na agad? Ano ka ba? Detective? Ikaw ba ang female version ni Sherlock Holmes? Or Detective Conan? Detective Loki?” Nakangiti niyang sabi. Napakabilis talaga niyang magshift ng mood. Actually, pareho sila ni Ethan. Requirement ba yun para maging Black Government?

Huminga ako ng malalim as I decided to let it go. Siguro naman ay may mababalitaan akong muli tungkol dito. Mukhang wala talaga silang balak ipaalam ang iniisip nila sa akin, eh.

“Hoy, Leondale. Ano’ng iniisip mo? Ayoko ng ganiyang hitsura, ha. Kung anuman ang binabalak mo, I’m telling you---”

“Shut up, Sison! I’m not gonna do anything stupid!” Iritable kong sabi at nagmartsa na palayo. Humabol naman si Makki. Tsk. With his tall and muscled body and long strides, hindi talaga malabong maabutan niya ako.

“Sabi mo yan, ah. Hindi ka mababaliw anytime at gagawa ng kung anuman,” paninigurado niya. Tsk. Pero hindi ako sigurado na wala akong gagawin. I can’t just leave it like that.

“Oo na,” sagot ko at tinakbo na ang natitirang distansiya sa kinaroroonan namin at sa dorm.

“Good night, Cutie!” Pahabol niyang sigaw. Hindi na ako sumagot o lumingon pa. Tss. Wala siyang kwentang kausap. Hindi niya sinagot ang mga tanong ko. Naabutan kong tahimik na nag-uusap sa sala ang ilang estudyante sa dorm. Siguradong ang insidente kanina ang topic nila. Naririnig ko rin ang tunog ng mga sirena ng mga police car sa labas. Umakyat na ako sa kwarto upang magpahinga. Napakadaming nangyari para sa araw na ito. At sobrang napapagod na ako. Naabutan ko na nakatingin sa may bintana sina Jamie at Mirden. Sabay silang lumingon sa akin nang pumasok ako.

“Saan ka na naman ba galing, Summer? Hindi ka man lang ba naaalarma o nakakaramdam ng takot?” Nakataas ang kilay na bungad sa akin ni Jamie.

“Baka isa talaga siyang shinigami at iniimbestigahan niya ang pagkawala ng kaluluwa dito,” biro ni Mirden na sinundan naman ng paniniko ni Jamie.

“Nakuha mo pang ipasok ang shinigami mo. Ano ka ba? Seryosong sitwasyon ito. Paano kung bumalik yung mga gumawa nun kay Andrew? Tapos nasa labas pa siya at nakita nila? Alam mo, nagda-doubt na ako sa security nitong Montello High, eh. Paanong may nakapasok na mga ganung tao dito?”

“Napakaseryoso mo naman, Jamie. Para namang mapipigilan mo si Summer kung gusto niyang nasa labas,” wika ni Mirden.

“Kesa naman mapahamak siya. She’s the new kid and she doesn’t know everything here.” I rolled my eyes. Tss. I’m here! Kung makapag-usap sila parang wala ako sa paligid, ah.

“Kayong dalawa, tumigil na kayo. Sumasakit na ang tainga ko sa inyo,” bored kong sabi. They frowned at me. Dumiretso na ako sa kama ko and collapsed on the bed. So tired.

“Sino kaya ang may kagagawan nun?” Narinig kong tanong ni Jamie. Mukhang ang krimeng iyon ang pinag-uusapan ng lahat.

“I don’t know. Sana lang malutas na kaagad ang kasong iyon. Nababalot na ng takot ang mga estudyante rito. Kawawa rin ang pamilya ni Andrew Novou. Ang alam ko bukas pa sila makakarating dahil puno na ang ng mga flights parito.” Tinig ni Mirden.

“Dapat mas higpitan pa ang pagbabantay. Magdagdag sila ng security guards. Para wala nang makapasok na outsider.”

“At paano mo naman nasiguro na tagalabas ang may gawa nun? Don’t you realize na mahigpit naman ang security rito?” Tanong ni Mirden.

“What do you wanna say?” Balik tanong ni Jamie. Hindi kaya ang ipinupunto ni Mirden ay mula sa loob ang gumawa nun?

“Well, yung time interval ng brownout at pagkatuklas sa bangkay.. hindi ba masyadong mabilis? Hindi magagawa ng isang outsider na gawin yun ng ganun kabilis. At saka mapapansin naman siguro kung merong mga kahina-hinalang outsider. Paano nila malalagpasan ang mga gwardiya nang ganun-ganun na lang?” Sa inaantok kong diwa at pagod na katawan, na-realize ko na may point si Mirden. Paano kung tama siya? Paano kung nasa loob lang ang kriminal? Pero saang anggulo pumapasok dito ang Mafia theory ko mula sa impormasyon nila Makki?

“Nakakatakot naman ang mga sinasabi mo…” Hindi ko na naipagpatuloy pa ang pakikinig sa usapan nila dahil nilamon na ng kawalan ang utak ko. Easy like that. Collapsing on the bed and passing out.

Too dark…

Too dark and I’m alone. Hindi ko alam kung anong ginagawa ko sa lugar na ito pero nakakaramdam ako ng panganib at takot. Sinubukan kong maglakad subalit muli akong napaurong. Isang ahas ang nasa harap ko at nakatingin sa aking mga mata… tila handang tumuklaw. It looked furious and fleeing will be futile. And I’m a little scared.

Tumakbo ako palayo subalit isang kahindik-hindik na senaryo ang tumambad sa paningin ko. Van is standing in front of me with his gun aiming at my heart. I was shocked… too shocked to move. Subalit isang

anino rin ang nakatayo sa likod ni Van at nakatutok ang baril nito sa ulo ni Freniere. I don’t know but I felt like I want to save him. I started to run towards him but it’s too late. The shadow pulled the trigger and Van jerked forward from the impact.

“Van!” Sigaw ko habang sinasalo ko siya sa kanyang pagtumba. I was really horrified. Why me? Why do I have to witness this? I looked at him and saw blood on his shirt. Then… he smiled at me. Not the annoying smirk, but a geniune smile… and he closed his eyes.

“NOOO!!!”

Uh, sh t. Napaupo ako mula sa pagkakahiga sa kama. Crap! Ano bang klaseng panaginip yun? But seriously, I’m silently thankful that it was just a dream. A bad dream but a dream nonetheless. Dahil anong gagawin ko kung totoo ang panaginip na yun? Bloody Monday. I still need to prepare for class.

“Bad dream?” Tanong ni Jamie na patungo sa bathroom. Hindi ako sumagot at inihanda ko ang mga susuotin ko sa araw na ito. Bigla kong naalala ang mga pangyayari kahapon. Kaya pala parang gloomy ang paligid. Siguradong laman pa rin ng mga usapan ang nangyari. Hanggang sa matapos na ako sa paliligo at paghahanda sa pagpasok ay hindi pa rin maalis sa isip ko ang hitsura ni Andrew Novou. I shook my head in an attempt to put it aside. Tahimik kaming naglalakad patungong Montello Main Building at nakita namin na nagtitipon ang mga estudyante sa harap nito. Nasa labas rin ang ilang taga-faculty at si Prinicipal Steins na may hawak na mikropono.

“Ano’ng meron?” Tahimik na sambit ni Mirden. Walang sumagot sa amin. Naglakad na lang kami palapit at sumama sa mga lipon ng estudyante. Lumingon-lingon ako sa paligid, umaasang makikita ko ang taong iyon subalit wala siya. Tanging si Makki lang ang nahagip ng paningin ko na nakikipagflirt sa dalawang magandang estudyante. Nakita ko rin si Ethan kasama si Trinity sa bandang unahan, ang mga miyembro ng Dark Monarch na tahimik na nakamasid at si Tyler na mukhang tulala at nakatingin sa kawalan.

“Maaari bang makuha muna namin ang inyong atensiyon?” Wika ni Principal Steins. Tumahimik ang lahat ng estudyante at tumingin sa direksiyon niya. Noong una ay inakala kong walang masyadong paki-alam sa awtoridad niya ang mga estudyante ng Montello. Ngayon ay nakikita kong natatanggap niya ang respeto ng mga estudyante rito. Bakas ang katandaan at karununga sa kulay abo niyang buhok at ang kagalang-galang na reputasyon sa magarang coat niyang suot.

“Hindi ko masasabing maganda ang umagang ito para sa ating lahat— mga estudyante, guro at kabahagi ng mahal nating Montello High. Gayunpaman ay binabati ko kayong lahat na mga naririto para sa isang panibagong araw. Isang trahedya ang yumanig sa buong school nitong nakaraang gabi. Isang kaklase, kaibigan at kasamahan ang nawala sa atin. Ang Montello High ay lubos na nakikidalamhati sa pamilya ni Andrew Novou at ganundin sa mga malalapit niyang kaibigan dito. Hindi man natin siya makita, mahawakan o makausap kailanpaman, mananatili pa rin sa bawat sulok ng Montello ang kaniyang ala-ala. Hindi natin siya makakalimutan, di ba?

“At dahil nga sa pangyayaring ito, kasama na rin ang sunog sa boy’s dormitory isang linggo na rin ang nakakaraan, inaatasan ko ang lahat na mag-ingat. Manatili sa inyong dormitoryo pag malalim na ang gabi at sumunod sa curfew. Walang sinuman sa atin ang nais na maulit pa ang pangyayaring ito…

“Nakikipagtulungan na ang paaralan sa mga awtoridad kaya kung sinuman sa inyo ang may napansing kahina-hinala ay ipagbigay-alam sa amin…”

Lumingon ako sa kinaroroonan ni Tyler. Nakatingin lang siya sa Principal at nakaguhit sa isang linya ang mga labi. Naisip ko kung alam na ba ng mga police ang tungkol sa Freniere Crest. Mukhang wala siyang balak na ipagbigay alam ang nalalaman niya. Kahit ang mga miyembro ng Black Government ay walang reaksyon. Siguradong alam ng awtoridad ang tungkol sa mafia at malamang na maiuugnay nila ang krimen.

Isa pang tanong ang gumugulo sa utak ko. Bakit alam ni Tyler ang mga bagay na nalalaman niya? Isa lang siyang ordinaryong estudyante, freshman, nerd-looking and baby-faced. Parang wala namang interesante sa

profile niya. Hindi rin daw siya gangster. Pero bakit alam niya ang tungkol sa Mafia at ganun siya kalapit sa Black Government?

“Inuulit ko, pag-ibayuhin niyo pa ang pag-iingat. Ang bawat isa sa inyo ay bahagi ng Montello High, kung kaya naman kayo ay mahalaga sa amin. Maaari na kayong pumunta sa inyong mga klase.” Pagkatapos ng Principal sa kaniyang pahayag, walang lingon-likod na naglakad si Tyler papasok ng building. He’s really acting weird.

Naghiwalay na rin kaming tatlo papunta sa aming mga klase. Ramdam sa classroom ang kalungkutan at kawalan ng isang estudyante. Tahimik ang lahat. Kaunti lang ang sumasali sa diskusyon tungkol sa librong ipinabasa sa amin. Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Isang beses ko pa lang yatang binasa ang librong iyon at hindi ko pa natapos. Sa klaseng ito ko nakausap si Andrew Novou. Kahapon ko nga lang nalaman na Andrew Novou pala ang pangalan niya.

“...Victor Frankenstein created his creature and turned his back on it. Reflect on it, guys. What do you think will happen if the creator turned his back on his creation? Just like us, humans, what do you think will happen if God turns His back on us? What will happen to mankind without His guidance?.. Maybe we’ll all become monsters…”

Wala rin ngayon ang leader ng Black Government na si Van. Tanging sina Ethan, Makki at ang ilan pang mga miyembro ang naroon. I don’t know why but I wanted to ask them about things… about him. Nasaan siya ngayon? Ano’ng ginagawa niya? Plotting another murder? Is he really capable of such evilness?

“It is human nature to act against gigantic, monstrous creature. They judged him based solely on his appearance. And Victor’s creation learned to hate humans…”

Lumilipad ang isipan ko sa kung saan. Talaga bang ang mafia ng pamilya ni Van ang may kagagawan ng krimen na iyon? Right, I see him as an evil man but not as an evil murderer. Bakit parang hindi ko matanggap na maaaring ganun siyang tao? Pero ano pa ba ang gusto kong marinig? He’s a gang leader! He’s on the mafia! He gave me death threats! What am I gonna

expect about him? Isang katok sa pinto ang nagpabalik sa akin sa kasalukuyan at lahat ng atensiyon namin ay napunta roon. Pumasok si Principal Steins at meron siyang kasamang dalawang tao. Ang isa ay pulis at ang isa ay mas mukhang Sherlock Holmes sa kaniyang suot. Ang kasamang police ay natatandaan kong nasa Principal's office noong nagkaroon ng sunog sa boy's dorm.

"Narito ba si Van Freniere?" Tanong ng Principal na tila nakadirekta sa mga kaibigan ni Van na sina Makki at Ethan.

"He's not here today, Principal Steins," sagot ni Mr. Flores. Inilakbay ng Principal ang kaniyang paningin sa buong klase. Ganun rin ang ginawa ng dalawang kasama niya.

"Makki Sison. Ethan Montreal. Sumama kayo sa akin," wika ni Principal Steins. Nagkatinginan muna ang dalawang tinawag bago tumayo at naglakad palapit sa pinto. Muling tumingin ang principal sa klase at sa pagkakataong ito ay tumigil iyon sa direksiyon ko. Nakaramdam ako ng kaba. Agad akong nagflashback ng mga offence ko. Kung ordinaryong pagkakataon lang ito ay baka hindi ko na ikinagulat ang pagsundo sa akin ng Principal o ng Guidance Councilor… And surely, the next thing that will happen is… kick-out. Subalit hindi ito ordinaryong pagkakataon. Hinahanap nila si Van Freniere.

"Summer Leondale, come with us," patuloy ng principal. Napahinto naman sa paglabas si Ethan at humarap sa Principal.

"Bakit pati si Summer? She's out of this!" Wika ni Ethan.

Hindi ko malaman kung tatayo ako o mananatili sa upuan. Gusto ko ring malaman kung bakit pati ako kailangang makausap ng Principal.

"Because she's with him yesterday," sagot ng Principal at tumalikod na upang lumabas. I felt the need and responsibility to do what he commanded kung kaya naman tumayo na ako at sumunod sa kanila. Hinayaan naman ni Ethan na mauna ako sa kanya habang papunta sa Principal's office. Magkakatabi kaming tatlo na umupo sa sofa kaharap ang dalawang pulis habang naupo naman ang Principal sa upuan sa likod ng kaniyang desk.

Tahimik lang kami habang hinihintay namin ang pagsasalita ni Principal Steins.

“Marahil ay nagtataka kayo kung bakit kayo naririto. Meron lang kaming katanungan tungkol kay Van Freniere.” Walang nagreact sa amin. Blangko lang ang aming mga ekspresyon. “Ipinakikilala ko sa inyo sina Policer Office Kent Thomas at si Detective Patrick Penber. Sila ang naka-assign sa imbestigasiyon ng pagpaslang kay Andrew Novou. Inaasahan namin ang inyong kooperasyon,” dagdag pa ng principal. Tumango lang si Ethan samantalang bored naman ang ekspresyon ni Makki. As for me, null. As in blank face. So bakit nga ba ako nandito? Nakahanda na rin ang black steno ng dalawa.

“Sino ang kasama ni Van Freniere kahapon ng umaga?” Tanong ni Detective Penber. I couldn’t move. I tried to glance away pero mukhang naparalisa ako sa unang katanungan. Siguro nga may point kung bakit ako narito. Sasabihin ko ba na ako ang kasama ni Van pagmulat pa lang ng kaniyang mga mata? Siguradong malalaman nila na lumabag ako sa rules. Okay lang naman sa akin yun kahit magkaroon ako ng madaming violations. Pero hindi ko lang matanggap ang maaari nilang isipin sa kung bakit kami magkasama ng umagang-umaga.

“Ako,” sagot ni Makki. “We’re roommates.” Ngayon ko lang napansin na napigil ko pala ang aking paghinga. I felt a slight relief as I breathed out…

“Wala siyang ikinilos na kakaiba? Wala siyang kausap na kahit sino? Wala ba siyang pinuntahan?” Tanong ng pulis.

Umiling si Makki. “Kakaiba? Nanaginip daw siya na kasama niyang matulog sa kama niya ang isang magandang babae. Mukhang kakaiba iyon para sa akin. Ano sa tingin niyo? Medyo naiinggit nga ako sa panaginip niya, eh.” Pareho naming sinamaan ng tingin ni Ethan si Makki. Imbento! Sinagot lang niya ng kindat ang tingin na ipinukol namin sa kaniya.

“Mr. Sison, we want you to take this seriously,” wika ni Principal Steins. Nagkibit-balikat si Makki.

“Meron ba siyang nabanggit tungkol kay Andrew Novou?” Muling tanong ng Detective. Halatang nauubos ang pasensiya niya sa attitude ni Makki kung kaya naman nagtanong na siya nang direkta.

“Wala. Hindi niya type si Andrew kaya malamang hindi niya iyon mapapanaginipan. Wala rin siyang premonition na mamamatay yung taong yun. Ni hindi nga yata niya alam ang pangalan nun, eh---” Pinutol ni Ethan ang ano pang sasabihin ni Makki.

“Kaklase namin si Andrew Novou sa English. At sigurado ako na hindi nakipag-usap si Van sa kaniya,” seryosong sagot ni Ethan. Tiningnan siya ng matagal ng detective at saka tumango.

“Saan pa siya pumunta kahapon?” This time, ang pulis na ang nagtanong muli dahil naba-bad shot na yata si Makki sa Detective.

“Sa gym. Naglaro kami,” bored na sagot ni Makki. Sa gym… Pumunta nga siya sa gym. Gumamit pa nga siya ng pesteng shower room. At… CRAP! I was with him!

“Tapos? Ano’ng sunod niyang ginawa?”

“Pumunta kami sa cafeteria for lunch pero meron yata siyang nakitang pagkain na hindi niya gusto. Fish! He doesn’t like fish. At meron fish na dish nung time na yun kaya pumunta na lang kami sa dorm.” Pumunta siya kahapon sa cafeteria? I didn’t see him.

“Pagkatapos nun?”

“Pumunta na ako sa gym. Pero sumunod siya at mukhang galit. Pagkatapos pinalayas niya lahat ng nasa locker room. Siguro dahil sa gutom. Hindi siya naglunch, eh. Pero kung ako ang tatanungin, nag-lunch ako, naawa sa akin yung mga sexy chicks sa gym kaya---” Pinatigil na si Makki ni Detective Penber by waving his hands. Napakawalang kwentang kausap talaga ni Makki.

“Wala ba siyang kasama sa locker room?” Tumingin sa akin si Makki. Mukhang it’s my turn na para sa interrogation. Ganito pala ang feeling.

Pakiramdam ko kasabwat ako sa isang krimen.

“Ako,” tipid kong sagot. Apat na pares ng mga mata ang naramdaman kong tumingin sa direksiyon ko. At muli ko itong sasabihin, ayoko talaga ng ganitong atensiyon. Naramdaman ko ang paglipat ni Detective Penber ng kaniyang Steno. Tumikhim naman si Principal Steins.

“Well, that was helpful but not that good to hear.” I tsked sa sinabi ng Principal. This old judgemental creature! Being with Van?! Sino bang may gusto nun?! Nakakainsulto ang conclusion niya!

“I got cleaning the locker room as my punishment. And that guy was just pissing me off the whole time! So yeah, I think that’s not good to hear,” sarcastic kong sagot. Naramdaman kong nagpipigil ng tawa si Makki.

“So, you’re with him,” the detective said. “Meron ba kayong pinag-usapan?”

“Wala.” Tipid kong sagot. Penber looked straight into my eyes. Hell! Parang binabasa niya ang sagot na gusto niyang marinig sa pamamagitan ng mga mata ko. Is there any other sentence to get my point across na wala? Meron ba siyang madidiskubreng unconsciously unknown sa akin mula sa matiim na tingin na ‘to? At paanong nahandle ni Makki ang mga tanong nito kanina? At least, Detective Penber seemed satsified sa nakikita niya.

“Paanong wala?” Muli nitong tanong. Ugh. Idol ko na si Makki. Kaya ba annoyed ang mood kanina ng Detective kay Makki dahil hindi niya ito napasunod sa nais niyang takbo ng pag-uusap?

“Bukod sa mga walang kwentang bagay, wala na.” Tinitigan lang niya ako ng matagal. Sinalubong ko ang tingin niya. Ngayon ko lang napansin na he looked young for his title and that he got a matured, handsome face. Siguro nasa 24 or 25 years old na siya. Yeah, right. He’s certainly good looking, intelligent and all, but he’s also creepy. I tore my glance away.

“Fine. He just asked me kung bakit magkasama kami ni Ethan na naglunch.” Ethan frowned. Siguro ay nagtataka rin siya kung bakit

interesado ang mokong na si Van na malaman kung bakit kami magkasama. Pinawalan ni Makki ang pinipigil niyang tawa.

“He… doesn’t… really… like… fish! Not appetizing! Haha!” Wika ni Makki kasabay ng mga halakhak niya. Ano bang droga ang tinitira nitong si Makki? Ang labo.

“At ano’ng nangyari?” Tanong ni Officer Kent. Nadistract yata si Detective Penber kay Makki. Ang lakas talaga niyang makawala ng konsentrasyon.

“Uh. Wala. Sabi ko, lunch.” Well, it’s not detailed but he took it, thankfully. I just grabbed the chance na hindi si Penber ang nagtatanong. Pero sandali lang talaga ang swerte at agad din na lumilipad. Dahil muling ibinalik ni Detective Penber ang atensiyon niya sa akin.

“Wala siyang ginawa?” His eyes bore on mine again at parang nagrarumble na naman ang utak ko at kusang naghahanap ng karampatang sagot.

“Well, nagalit siya kasi hindi ako sumagot ng maayos. Harsh. Bayolente talaga ang devil gangster na yun,” wika ko. May isinulat siya sa steno niya at sinalungguhitan.

What? What did I say? Was that relevant? Ethan flinched on my side.

“Detective Penber, Van is violent, yes. But I don’t think you get the point about Van being violent. And I suggest you should have some details under that VIOLENCE stuff.”

VIOLENCE. So that was about that thing? Medyo nag-isip naman si Detective Penber sa sinabi ni Ethan. Makki Sison could irritate the hell out of the Great Detective Patrick Penber. Ethan Montreal could make him pause and think. And I was just like a stupid instrument waiting to be played by the Detective’s desired tempo. Frustrating, I know. Mukhang hindi sila gangsters for nothing like what I always thought of them. O nakasanayan na nila ang mga ganitong interrogations na may sarili na silang taktika para hindi nila masabi sa mga pulis ang mga hinahanap nitong mga detalye nang hindi sila mukhang nagsisinungaling. Either way, that made them more dangerous.

“Details? You got some details in mind, Ethan?” Nakahawak sa chin na tanong ng Detective.

“He never killed anyone,” seryosong sagot ni Ethan. Sumeryoso rin si Makki. Really, that determined look on their faces was creeping me out. It was a testament to their loyalty to Van. Tumangu-tango si Detective Penber.

“Too early… Masyado pang maaga para sa mga conclusions.” Muli niyang ibinaling ang atensiyon sa akin. Tensed… Uh, ano bang meron ang mga gangsters? “Ano’ng violence ang ginawa niya?”

Mahabang pause. Kailangan ko ba talagang mag-suffer sa interrogation na ito?

“Grabbed my arm… pushed me against the wall… threatened me…” Mahina kong sagot. Muling tumango ang detective. Hindi naman talaga ako mahihirapan nang ganito kung sasabihin ko ang gusto nilang sabihin ko… But there’s again this stupid vague feeling… Hindi niya pinawalan ang mata ko and I just stared at him back.

“Nagalit ka sa kaniya?” Tanong niya.

“Oo.” Well, effortlessly true.

“Pero ayon sa nabasa kong records mo kanina, transferee ka lang dito. And you hate him already sa ganung time span?”

“He’s a jerk,” inis kong sagot.

“Do you like him?” What the hell?! Paano napunta ang usapan doon?

“Baliw ka ba? Hell, no! He threatened me--- he threatened to kill me! He said he could find my family and kill all of them. How the hellfire am I gonna like him?!” Galit kong sagot. Huli na nang marealize ko ang implikasyon ng mga sinabi ko.

Agad na nagsulat sa kwaderno ang dalawang alagad ng batas habang napatulala sa akin si Makki. Si Ethan ang agad na nakabawi.

“Detective, your questions are too leading to consider. Kasama ba sa tactics mo ang pang-i-stress ng tao?” Sa isang weird na paraan, alam kong frustrated na si Ethan subalit hindi niya iyon ipinakita.

“If it’s what the truth calls for.” Umarko ang isang gilid ng labi ni Detective Penber para sa isang bahagyang ngiti. Mukhang nakuha niya ang gusto niya sa huling sagot ko. At isang bagay ang luminaw sa isipan ko. It should have been easier telling exact details like that nung umpisa pa lang. Pero nahirapan ako… I took it hard, like I was protecting something… or someone. Nag-iingat ako dahil gusto kong salain ang mga sasabihin ko. For what? Para sa taong iyon? At dahil lang sa nalagot ang temper ko…

“So Miss Leondale, what else did he do or say?” Muling tanong ni Detective Penber. I just looked at him blankly. I’m already tired of this.

“I’m done here. He’d been with Trinity Domingo after that. You better screw her mind now,” sagot ko. The hell with me. Bakit parang gusto kong itorture ang sarili ko? I felt so stupid.

Umiling si Makki. “He just blew her outside the gym. Si Ethan at ako na ang kasama niya hanggang gabi. Bukod sa xbox, wala na kaming masasabi sa inyo. Basta after nun, nag Need for Speech na siya na Live Action gamit ang Bugatti Peyvron niya. Pero kung interesado ka sa laro namin, hell, he’s damn good and he beat the hell out of our friggin’ sexy ass. And---”

“Sa tingin ko’y hanggang dito na muna ang mga katanungan namin sa inyo. Asahan niyo na lang ang muli nating pagkikita.” Tumayo na si Detective Penber.

“Bakit niyo iniimbestigahan si Van?” Nakatungong wika ni Ethan. We stared at him and he suddenly wore a dangerous look on his face. Maybe I really did something wrong in this interrogation.

“Hindi namin kailangang ipaliwanag sa iyo ang buong detalye. Confidential ang mga impormasyon nito,” sagot ng pulis at tumayo na rin sa tabi ng Detective. Hindi na nagsalita pa si Ethan. Tahimik lang naming pinanuod ang pag-alis nila.

Nauna akong tumakbo palabas ng pinto nang pahintulutan na kaming umalis ng principal. Dahil frustrated ako sa sarili ko. Kailan pa ako naging tanga? Why the hell did I let that detective screw with my mind? Tahimik lang akong bumalik sa upuan ko sa English class. Nararamdaman ko ang mga sulyap ng mga estudyante sa direksiyon ko subalit hindi ko na lang iyon pinansin. Nafu-frustrate talaga ako sa nangyari kanina. Paano ko hinayaan na humantong ang mga walang kwentang tanong na yun into admitting that Van threatened me? And I became friggin' helpful with the investigation against him. And I'm also wondering why I am so bothered about it! I hate Van Freniere, that is true. Kung ganun bakit gusto ko siyang protektahan kanina? Bakit naiinis ako sa sarili ko? Or maybe that was just my pride that is bothering me? Because I hated it when someone gets what they want from me.

Hindi na bumalik pa sina Ethan at Makki sa klase. Hanggang sa paglalakad ko patungong cafeteria ay hindi ko sila nakita. Hindi ko na rin napagtutuunan ng pansin ang pag-uusap nina Mirden at Jamie habang kumakain. Para akong hangin lang na tinapos ang mga subject sa maghapon. Tsk! I really did something wrong!

"Summer! Oh, dear heaven! Ibalik mo kay Summer ang katawan na yan kung sino ka man na sumapi sa kaniya!" Narinig kong bulalas ni Jamie sa tabi ko. Naglalakad na kami papuntang dorm mula sa gym. Tiningnan ko lang siya at muling ibinaling ang tingin sa aming dinaraanan.

"Meron bang nangyari? Balita na kasi sa school na kinausap ka ng mga pulis kanina. Pati si Makki at Ethan. So ano'ng nangyari?" Tanong ni Jamie. Now I know the purpose of Mirden's existence. To save me from Jamie's hopeless conversations.

"Wala," sagot ko.

"Tungkol ba kay Andrew Novou? Eh, hindi mo naman siya kilala di ba?"

"Hindi."

"Aling hindi? Hindi tungkol kay Andrew o hindi mo siya kilala?"

I suddenly halted and faced her. “Shut up, Jamie,” inis kong sabi.

“Pero—”

“Shut the f ck up!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya. Natigilan naman siya subalit umirap lang siya at sumimangot sa akin. Uh. Lahat siguro ng tao, merong nakakainis na part sa kanila.

“Er. Tao kasi ako and I know how to talk. Malay ko bang alien ka,” sagot niya. Matapos naming magpalitan ng masasamang tingin ay dumiretso na kami sa paglalakad. Sa ganitong sitwasyon, mas trip ko yata ang presensiya ni Mirden na tahimik lang at pipiliing magbasa ng libro o manga.

I still felt stupid. Nakakainis. Nakaka-bobo ang mga pangyayari. Bakit ba ako naging parte ng mga pangyayaring ito?! At ang taong iyon? Bakit kahit wala siya ay nagagawa pa rin niyang gawing impyerno ang buhay ko! Higit sa lahat, nasaan siya?

[10] Chapter 10: Death For Cutting Class

Chapter 10: Death for Cutting Class

I really hate being in the dark. I hate the feeling that I’m being used and I don’t really like feeling stupid. Everything seems like crap now.

Four days. Four days na kaming walang naririnig tungkol kay Van. Kahit si Tyler ay umiiwas kapag nakikita namin. Hindi na rin ako kinausap pa ni Ethan. And Makki is… Makki— as always— busy with his d mn hobby: manwhoring. He sure got a load of teenage hormones.

“Thank God, it’s Fridaaayyyyy!” Matinis ang boses na sigaw ni Jamie mula sa banyo.

“Oh, crap! It’s Friday!” Bulalas naman ni Mirden na naglalagay ng libro sa bag. Isinilip ni Jamie ang ulo niya mula sa banyo at saka nagtanong. “Why?”

Isinuot ni Mirden ang glasses niya. “Exams! Kahit papaano ay gusto kong manatili sa Top 23. Hindi ko man makuha yung ibang category, kahit man

lang sa grades, makabawi ako.”

I frowned. Ganun ba kaimportante ang ranking? And what’s mine, by the way? I guess I’ll find out after the exams. And of course, I won’t even care about it. Wala sa kondisyon ang isip kong paghandaan ang exam.

“Sa Monday pa naman yun, di ba? I got a better idea!” Nakangiting wika ni Jamie. Nauubos na ang pasensya ko sa usapan nila. Kinuha ko ang tuwalya at lumakad papuntang banyo. Hihilain ko na lang siya palabas kung wala siyang balak na magmadali sa paliligo.

Lumingon sa akin si Jamie. “Let’s go to the mall!” Energetic niyang wika. Mirden frowned at ipinagpatuloy ang pag-aayos ng gamit. Mukha namang maganda ang ideya ni Jamie.

“I’d rather study,” wika ni Mirden. Itinulak ko papasok si Jamie sa banyo at isinara ang pinto nito saka pumunta sa direksiyon ni Mirden. Kinuha ko ang bag niya at itinabi iyon sa ibaba ng kama. Gulat niyang inangat ang paningin sa akin.

“Pupunta tayong mall,” seryoso kong sabi.

“Pero! Ayokong umabsent,” tutol niya.

“O magsusunog tayo ng libro,” dagdag ko sa sinabi ko kanina.

“Tara na sa Mall! Jamie! Magmadali ka na diyan. Kailangan pa nating planuhin ang pagtakas natin,” sigaw ni Mirden kay Jamie na sinagot lang nito ng isang matinis na tawa.

Ilang sandali pa ay nasa labas na kami ng dorm at hinihintay ang pagpapalitan ng mga gwardiya. Nang makita naming pumasok ang gwardiyang nagbabantay kasama ang kahalili niya sa Guardhouse upang magpalit ng uniporme, sabay-sabay kaming tumakbo palabas ng gate ng Montello High at palayo sa school.

Hindi pa rin makapaniwala si Mirden na nagawa niyang mag-mall sa halip na pumasok sa klase at magreview. Jamie is amazed at the success of our

plan.

“Hindi ko tuloy alam kung tama ba na kinaibigan ko kayong dalawa. Kapag bumaba lang talaga ang rank ko sa school na ito then my Dad will definitely have a word with me!” Humihingal na wika ni Mirden nang huminto kami at nag-abang ng taxi.

Jamie snorted. “Bloody expectations.”

“Mali ang desisyong ito. Bumalik na kaya tayo,” wika ni Mirden.

Tiningnan ko siya ng masama. “Paano kapag namatay ka ngayon o bukas. Eh di, hindi ka na nakapag-mall.” She sighed in surrender. Two is to one na ang senaryo kaya wala na siyang magagawa. Nang may humintong taxi sa may harapan namin ay agad kaming sumakay at sinabi ang direksiyon ng mall. Medyo na-miss ko rin ang tumambay sa lugar na iyon.

“Let’s get some new dress,” suhestiyon ni Jamie.

“And buy some books,” dagdag ni Mirden.

Pumasok kami sa isang botique at hinayaan si Jamie na isukat lahat ng magustuhan. She got an expensive taste in fashion. Maybe her Dad is a politician, businessman or whatever it is that makes her piggy bank fat. Kumuha si Jamie ng isang laced royal blue cocktail na sleeveless at iniabot sa akin. Tiningnan ko lang iyon.

“Ano ka ba, isukat mo. Sa tingin ko, bagay iyan sa iyo. And Mirden,” kinuha niya ang isang yellow dress na merong small, black ruffles sa laylayan, “this will fit you. Sige, isukat niyo na. My treat.” At itinulak niya kami pareho sa magkahiwalay na fitting room. Wala na kaming nagawa kundi isuot ang damit na pinili ni Jamie. Halos sabay rin kaming lumabas ni Mirden wearing the dress over our converse.

“See? Lovely young ladies,” nakangiting komento ni Jamie.

“This won’t be practical on gang fights,” sagot ko na ikinasimangot niya. Mirden just laughed.

“Ipangako mong hindi mo yan gagamitin sa mga deadly adventures mo! You shouldn’t ruin a dress just to kill someone. Sayang naman yung damit,” wika niya. She really has a passion for dresses, huh.

“If it means a lot to you,” umiiling na lang na sagot ko. Sunod naming pinuntahan ay ang heaven for Mirden and wonderland for me--- Bookstore. I love books. Well, mostly yung mga fiction ang kinahihiligan ko. Agad na dumiretso si Mirden sa Manga section at chineck ang latest volume ni Tite Kubo ng Bleach. Ilang beses ko na bang naririnig ang mga sentimyento niya sa kung gaano katagal maglabas ng new chapter ang author? Agad kong kinuha ang Bloodlines ni Richelle Mead at binayaran sa counter. It’s time for me to grow some fangs. Matapos naming bilhin ang mga librong balak naming basahin ay nagpunta kami sa Timezone at naglaro bago kumain sa Food court.

“You’re really a pizza monster,” sabi ni Jamie habang nakatingin sa akin. Nagkibit-balikat lang ako habang ipinagpapatuloy ang pagkain.

“Since nagawa na natin ang lahat ng gusto nating gawin dito, baka pwedeng bumalik na tayo sa school. Baka mamaya, hinahanap na pala tayo doon,” wika ni Mirden.

Jamie waved her hand in dismissal. “Of course, hahanapin tayo. Ang kailangan lang naman natin ay kaunting matatalinong eksplanasyon. Katulad ng… may kaunting librong binili si Mirden para sa pagre-review sa darating na exam. O dumating ang workaholic kong ama mula sa business trip at handa niyang bilhin ang buong mall para sa akin. O pwede rin namang nagkasakit si Summer at kailangan niya ng isang espesyalista na hindi isang tableta at kaunting pahinga ang inirereseta. What do you think?” Napanganga kami sa mga rason na nakaplano sa utak ni Jamie. Halos lahat ng sinabi niya ay malayo sa nangyari o sa mga posibleng mangyari.

“Yan na ba ang pinakamatalino mong eksplanasyon?” Nakangiwi kong tanong.

“Kahit sana hindi matalino basta kapani-paniwala,” sabi ni Mirden.

Jamie just tossed her hair at kumain ng sundae. “Mas okay na yun kaysa naman ang malapit sa reyalidad na bangkay na tayong magpapakita tulad ni Andrew Novou.” Napatigil ako sa pagkain.

“Alam mo, mas matalino talaga yung nauna mong sinabi. Ubusin na nga natin ito at bumalik na sa dorm,” wika ni Mirden.

Matapos kumain ay naglakad na kami sa eskinita papunta sa sakayan. Medyo madilim na rin ang paligid nang mapagpasyahan naming umuwi na. Subalit naramdaman ko na tila may mali nang sa bawat kantong daanan namin ay may mga lalaking tumitingin sa amin. Ito naman yung daan na tinahak ng taxi kanina kaya kampante kami na walang magiging problema. Pero mukhang mas malapit ang sitwasyon namin ngayon sa mas kapani-paniwalang part ng planadong rason ni Jamie. Nagdilang-anghel ba siya o napakinggan siya ng demonyo? Agh!

Naramdaman ko na ang trouble nang isang grupo na pinangungunahan ng isang lalaking maraming piercings at tattoo ang naglakad pasalubong sa amin. Hinawakan ni Jamie ang braso ko at tumigil kami. Nilingon ko ang daan pabalik subalit may tatlong kalalakihan ang papalapit rin sa direksyon namin. Itinuon ko ang atensyon ko sa mas delikadong grupo sa harap. Isa sa mga tattoo niya sa katawan ang nakilala ko nang maglapit na ang distansya namin at tumigil sila.

“Bakit kayo nasa teritoryo namin?” Puno ng malisya at panganib ang kaniyang tinig. Mas humigpit ang kapit ni Jamie sa akin samantalang si Mirden ay nagtago sa aking likuran. Nakaramdam ako ng tensyon subalit hindi ko iyon ipinakita. Kung ipapahalata ko ang takot ko na pinapantayan ng nararamdaman ng dalawa kong kasama, then we’re screwed up. The truth is, we’re dead. It will just get worse if all of us will be eaten by our fears.

“Dumadaan lang kami pauwi. Hindi namin alam na may nagmamay-ari ng lugar na ito,” kalmado kong sagot. Balak ko sanang pairalin ang sarcasm sa sinabi ko subalit na-realize ko agad na hindi iyon makakatulong sa kalagayan namin ngayon.

Isa sa mga miyembro ng grupong iyon ang nagsalita. “Bago ba kayo dito? Baka gusto niyong makipaglaro sa amin.” At ngumisi ito kay Jamie. Muli kong sinulyapan ang tattoo sa may leeg ng umaaktong pinuno nila.

“Ano’ng laro?” Ni hindi mababakasan ng pag-aalinlangan ko takot ang tinig ko. Mas humigpit lalo ang kapit ni Jamie. Takot namang nilibot ni Mirden ng tingin ang paligid para sa posibleng naming pagtakas.

“Magaganda kayo. At wala pa akong nakitang babae na kasing tapang mo. Sayang naman kung babasagin lang namin ang angas mo. Kung gusto mo, ibigay mo na lang sa amin ang dalawa mong kaibigan at makakaalis ka na,” wika ni Tattooed Man. Tila nawala ang dugo sa mukha nila Jamie at Mirden at kitang-kita ang panghihilakbot nila sa maaring mangyari.

Tumulo ang luha ni Jamie. “Just let us go!” Sigaw niya. Tumawa lang ang mga pangit na mokong. Napakawalang-kwenta nila para manakot ng mga kaawa-awa at walang labang babae.

“Ano’ng desisyon mo? Nagugutom na kami, eh,” tanong ng lalaking puno ng tattoo at tiningnan sina Mirden at Jamie. Ngumisi ako sa kanila. Nang makita ng dalawa kong kasama ang devilish smirk ko, tila nawalan ng pag-asa ang mga reaksyon nila.

“Transferee lang ako at hindi ko sila kaibigan,” nakangisi ko pa ring sagot. Na-shock naman silang lahat kahit ang mga nasa harap naming street gangsters. Ngayon lang din siguro sila nakakita ng isang taong kasing-sama ko. Bumitiw si Jamie sa braso ko.

“Cold, heartless bitch. Gusto na talaga kita. Malaya ka na,” sagot ng tila pinuno ng grupo. Subalit nang akmang hahawakan na niya sina Jamie at Mirden ay marahas kong tinabig ang braso niya.

“Hindi rin naman ako mapagbigay na tao kaya hindi mo sila pwedeng hawakan.” Nawala na ang ngisi ko at buong talim ko silang tiningnan.

Kumunot ang noo ng lalaki. “G go ka pala! Ano’ng gusto mong mangyari?!!” Galit nitong tanong. Sinulyapan ko muli ang tattoo niya sa leeg at buong tapang na sinalubong ang tingin niya.

Tinuro ko ang tattoo. “Freniere Mafia crest. Kayo ang may kagagawan ng pagkamatay ni Andrew Novou.” Muling na-shock ang lahat— biktima at ang mga nambibiktima. Agad ding nakabawi ang tila pinuno nila.

“Yung batang payatot na palpak? Dapat lang sa kaniya yun. Paano mo nalaman ang bagay na iyan?” Tanong ng lalaki.

“Pakawalan niyo kami o sasabihin ko ang lahat sa pulis.” Alam kong sugal itong ginagawa ko subalit sa mga oras na ito ay wala na kong nakikitang iba pang paraan para makaligtas kami sa sitwasyon na ito. Tanggap ko namang mamamatay ang lahat— maski sina Jamie at Mirden— huwag lang ako ang maging dahilan. At isa pa, hindi ko man sila kaibigan, sinabi naman nilang kaibigan nila ako. Tss! Ito na nga ba ang ayaw ko sa mga kaibi-kaibigan na yan, eh!

Tumawa lang ang tila pinuno nila. “Sa tingin mo ba, takot ang mga Freniere sa batas?” Agad na rumehistro sa akin ang naging miskalkulasyon ko at alam kong wala na kaming ligtas. Pero hindi ko ugali ang magpahuli ng ganun kadali. Hinawakan ko sa braso sina Jamie at Mirden at hinila ko sila patakbo sa likod. Ginamit ko ang pagkagulat ng grupo upang makalayo.

Nang malapit na kami sa tatlong gangster na nakaharang ay agad kong sinabi ang plano ko kina Jamie at Mirden. “Just run! Don’t stop! Get away from here o ako mismo ang papatay sa inyong dalawa!” Sinipa ko ng ubod lakas sa pribadong parte ang unang lalaking nakalapit sa amin.

Just run. Don’t stop. Ano bang klaseng plano ang naisip ko?

“No, Summer! We can’t just leave you here!” Wika ni Jamie na patuloy pa rin sa pag-iyak. Nagpakawala ako ng suntok sa panga ng isa pang lalaki.

“Damn! Just run!” Sigaw ko sa kanila. Hindi ko alam kung gaano katagal ko kayang pigilin ang mga gangster na ito bago sila maabutan lalo na at tumatakbo na sa direksyon namin ang ibang naiwan. Mabuti na lang at agad naintindihan ni Mirden ang lahat at hinila niya si Jamie.

“Hold on, Summer! Tatawag kami ng tulong! Babalikan ka namin! Promise!” Sigaw ni Mirden habang mabilis silang lumalayo. That was a

genius thing to do, Mirden. Isang suntok sa sikmura ang nagpatigil sa akin saglit sa paglaban at agad nilang hinawakan ang magkabila kong braso. Mukhang mali ang pangalan na ibinigay sa akin ng mga magulang ko. Dapat Trouble Leondale ang nasa birth certificate ko.

“Bitch! Walang kwentang heroic stunt!” At lumanding ang kamao ng tila pinuno nila sa panga ko na nakapagpadugo ng labi ko. I spat the blood I tasted in my mouth and glared at him.

“Bobo! Hindi ako nagpapakabayani! Matagal lang talaga akong tumakbo! G go!” Sigaw ko sa malapit niyang mukha. Kitang-kita ang galit niya dahil nagawang makatakas ng dalawa kong kasama.

Isang sampal ang natamo ko. “Gusto mong maranasan ang kinahantungan ni Novou? Kung ganun, hindi ko na iyon patatagalin pa.” Naglabas siya ng baril at itinutok sa sentido ko. I closed my eyes at nag-flashback ang lahat ng pangyayari sa buhay ko. I’ve never been a good girl. Now, I wonder, did I really enjoy this life?

“Nagdadasal ka? Tama yan dahil katapusan mo na.” Narinig kong ikinasa niya ang baril. Maybe this is where I’m supposed to end. Another Novou story para sa Montello High. For sure, magsa-suffer sina Jamie at Mirden sa way of interrogation ni Detective Patrick Penber. Jet Black was right. Man always think about his past before he dies, as if he were frantically searching for proof that he truly lived. In my case, I don’t know if I really lived. And now, I’ll die. Hindi man lang ako nabigyan ng chance na makapagpa-alam.

Isa pang kasa ng baril ang narinig ko. What? Ganun ba ako kahirap patayin at kailangang dalawang bala ang bumaon sa ulo ko?

“Let her go o pasasabugin ko ang bungo mo, Spiel,” wika ng isang boses na hindi ko makakalimutan. Narito siya? Iniligtas niya ako? That voice that I knew belonged to the devil has become a miracle for me. Binuksan ko ang mga mata ko and there he was. With all his dark and dangerous look, full of power at nakatayo siya sa likod ng lalaking puno ng tattoo habang may hawak na baril na nakatutok rito.

“Master Freniere!” Bulalas ng tinatawag na Spiel at dahan-dahang ibinaba ang kaniyang baril. Agad na lumapit si Van sa akin at sinalo ako sa baywang nang pakawalan ako ng mga nakahawak sa braso ko. Nakita kong rumehistro ang galit ni Van sa mukha niya nang mapansin niya ang dugo sa aking labi.

“F ck you, Spiel! Sinaktan niyo siya! Papatayin ko ang lahat ng humawak sa kaniya!” Galit na galit na sigaw ni Van at muling tinutukan ng baril ang tinawag niyang Spiel. Nakakatakot talagang magalit ang demonyo. Kahit hindi ko maintindihan kung ano’ng ikinagagalit niya. Tumungo lang si Spiel na tila hinihintay ang katapusan niya.

“Idiot! Ibaba mo nga yan!” At hinila ko ang braso niyang may hawak na baril. Maang naman na napatingin sa akin si Spiel at ang iba pang gangster. What?! Meron ba akong secret shocking code na sinabi?

Ibinaba naman ni Van ang baril. “Let’s go.” At inilalayan niya akong maglakad papalayo. Agad kong kinuha ang shopping bag na nalaglag ko kanina habang nagkakagulo. Humarang sa daan namin si Spiel.

“May alam siya tungkol sa Mafia. At kay Novou. Kailangan natin siyang patahimikin. Kailangan natin siyang iharap kay Tres.” Muling inangat ni Van ang baril at itinutok sa mukha si Spiel. Tahimik na lumayo ang lalaki sa harapan namin at ipinagpatuloy na namin ang paglalakad patungo sa isang black Lamboghini Murcielago. Wow. Mukhang may collection siya ng mga dream car.

Itinulak niya ako sa passenger seat at pabagsak na isinara ang pinto. Saka siya umikot patungo sa driver’s seat. Tahimik siyang nag-drive habang pinanatili ko ang paningin ko sa labas. Baka sakaling makita ko sina Jamie at Mirden.

Madalas ay sinusulyapan ko ang stiffed niyang pigura sa tabi ko. I still couldn’t believe that he just saved me from those street gangsters. Maybe he isn’t that evil at all? Kahit paano pala ay marunong din siyang gumawa ng mabuti.

Pero nang umabot na sa kalahating oras ang pananatili namin sa kalsada at hindi pa rin siya nagsasalita, tila nawala muli ang lahat ng good points na nabuo sa utak ko tungkol kay Van Freniere. Hindi pamilyar na lugar ang dinaraanan namin at mas kumonti at gumagarbo ang mga bahay na nakikita ko sa paligid.

“Where the hell are you taking me?” Kabado kong tanong. What if he’s really a devil and he just wanted to have the pleasure of killing me with his own hands?

Hindi niya ako nilingon. “Kay Tres,” sagot niya habang nakatingin sa kalsada. I grabbed the door on my side. It’s locked. Masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko sa kaniya. So he didn’t really plan to save me. dahil kung sino man ang Tres na yun, sigurado akong daan siya sa mas magandang katapusan ko.

“Crap! I’ve always known that you’re a devil!” Frustrated kong sabi. Mostly, dahil akala ko talaga ay iniligtas niya ako.

Malawak na lupain na may maraming puno at mahabang kalsada ang dinaanan namin bago ko natanaw ang isang napakalaking mansion. It’s like those places you see on fairy tales but I still could see the depth of danger within those gothic styles and curves. May ilang naka-black suit na lalaki sa paligid na tila inirereport sa kung sinoman ang bawat pagdaan namin. Napaka-elegante sana ng paligid kung wala lang mga baril ang mga taong nakikita ko. Tingin ko pa lang, sigurado na akong high-powered ang mga sandata nila.

“Dito mo ba iniipon ang dugo ng mga taong pinapatumba mo?” Tanong ko.

Inihinto niya ang kotse sa harap ng mansyon. “Shut up,” wika niya at saka lumabas ng sasakyan. Hindi ko na hinintay na pagbuksan niya ako. Nakalabas na ako ng kotse ng marating niya ang side ko. Mahigpit niya akong hinawakan sa braso at iginiya papasok.

Sa kabila ng naghihintay kong kamatayan ay hindi ko pa rin maiwasan na humanga sa hitsura ng loob ng mansyon. Napaka-sophisticated at artistic ng interior design nito. Para akong nasa isang period ng panahon na ang mga

tao ay puro naka-ball gowns at tuxedo. Well, it's really like a fairytale… dark fairytale. Paano ko naiisip ang mga ganitong bagay ngayong ang buhay ko ay hawak na ng Mafia.

A deep voice boomed in the house and a man appeared at the grand staircase. Nagsimula siyang lumakad pababa. Para akong nakakita ng mas matured na Van, maybe in his early twenties. Long hair, tall, strong features and with the same piercing brown eyes. Van is enchanting, dangerous and disgustingly gorgeous. While this man who is gracefully stepping down the staircase is ravishing and devilishly handsome. Tsk!

"My dear young devil of a brother." So I guess perfection runs in the family. Parang ayoko na lang malaman kung gaano pa kaperfect ang mga magulang nila.

"Tres," wika ni Van. So this is Tres.

"Is she the brave girl?" Tanong ni Tres. Hindi sumagot si Van . Laking gulat ko nang bumunot ng baril si Older Van at itinutok sa akin. For the second time! Bakit ba dumudoble ang engkwentro ko sa mga baril sa araw na ito? Pero ang mas ikinagulat ko is when Van stepped in front of me.

"She's mine to kill. At my own time," wika ni Van.

Ibinaba ni Tres ang baril. "Why prolong her agony?"

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“That’s how I work,” sagot ni Van.

“Sadistic, little Giovanni.” Tres smirked.

“Cold-blooded, old Sebastian,” ani Van. What weirdos! I started to back away from them subalit unang hakbang pa lang ng paa ko patalikod ay sabay silang lumingon sa akin. I swear that I did not make a sound pero bakit tila may sensor ang paligid at nalaman nila ang balak kong gawin?

Tres stared at me intently. “If I were you, I’m not gonna do that.”

“But you’re not me,” sagot ko kasabay ng paghalukipkip.

Tumawa ng pagak ang tinatawag na Tres. It’s a sexy and devilish laugh but dangerous as well. I can’t even find the humor in it.

“Witty… cute… and pathetically stupid. Thanks to the odds cause I’m not you. For soon, you’ll be dead.” At tila isang teddy bear na inilapit niya ang baril sa kaniyang pisngi. Naiinis ako. Naiinis ako dahil may point siya! Hindi pa ba sapat na palagi akong nakikipag-poker game kay kamatayan kapag nadadawit ako sa mga gangster trouble? At ngayon, bilang na ang mga oras ko dahil pati ang Mafia, kinalaban ko. Yeah, pathetically stupid.

“At least, hindi ako mamamatay tao.” Definitely stupid! Dahil mukhang hindi nagustuhan ni Van ang narinig niya. Hindi naman nawawala ang smirk sa mukha ni Tres.

Tinapik niya si Van sa balikat. “Kill her,” nakangiti niyang sabi.

Ilang segundo lang yata ang lumipas at nakita ko na lang ang sarili ko na kinakaladkad sa hagdan paakyat ng mansyon. Hindi pa rin nawawala ang nakakainis na ngiti sa labi ni Tres nang lingunin ko siya. How I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face! Hindi ko naman masyadong makita ang mukha ni Van habang kinakaladkad ako. Malamang it’s a deadly face. Kelan ba siya natuwa na nasa paligid ako?

Halos hindi ko na mapansin ang detalye ng kagandahan ng mansyon. Makakapag-site seeing pa ba ako kung halos humiwalay na ang braso ko sa

aking katawan dahil sa malakas na paghila ni Van? Tumigil lang siya ng marating namin ang veranda ng ikatlong palapag. Kahit gaano pa ako nasusuklam sa taong kasama ko, tila pinipilit iyong mapawi ng kagandahang nakikita ko sa paligid. Tanaw na tanaw ko ang lawak ng mala-fairytale nilang hardin. Nang dahil sa tensyon ay hindi ko napansin kanina ang malaking fountain na pinalilibutan ng paikot na drive way. Mga mamahaling kotse na nakasampa sa mga pinong bermuda. Maraming bulaklak lalo na sa kanang bahagi ng mansyon. Tila naroon si Jane Austen at nagsusulat ng isang bagong libro na tumutukoy sa kahalagahan at kakayahan ng mga kababaihan. Like her, I'm always a fan of feminism. Informally, it's girl power. Buong konsentrasyon kong binawi ang paningin mula sa nakakaengganyong tanawin upang komprontahin ang lalaking ang tanging alam ay gumawa ng krimen.

"What, you're gonna throw me down from here?" Hindi ko alam kung saan ko pa nakukuha ang tapang sa boses ko considering na halos ilang beses na kong muntik salubungin ni Kamatayan sa kabilang buhay ngayong araw na ito.

Mas humigpit ang kapit niya sa braso ko. "If you don't control your mouth, hindi mo mamamalayan ang pagsabog ng bungo mo. Sa bawat salitang pinakakawalan mo ay pwede kang patayin ni Tres ng walang pag-aalinlangan."

I flinched. I'm totally aware of that! Pero nakakawalang pag-asa pala kung sa bibig mismo ni Van nanggaling. Maybe I hoped. For that very short moment, I really thought that he genuinely wanted to save me. Pero dadalhin lang pala niya ako sa bahay ng mas nakakatakot na halimaw. And to think that he--- all this time--- is a terrible monster.

"You're all criminals!" I spat at him. Ni hindi ko napag-isipan iyon bago lumabas sa aking bibig.

He returned it with a deadlier look and squeezed my jaw with his free right hand, his other hand still grasping my arm brutally. "Be careful with your sweet little bitchy tongue or I'm gonna cut it off!" He said menacingly.

I flinched again. Nararamdaman ko na ang sakit ng pagbaon ng mga daliri niya sa aking balat. “Jerk! You are hurting me!” I said through gritted teeth. Mukha namang wala siyang balak na durugin ang bone marrow ko kaya pinakawalan niya rin ako.

“Hangga’t naririto ka sa mansyon, panatilihin mong nakatikom ang bibig mo. Wala kang sasabihin, komento o opinyon,” wika ni Van.

“Ikaw ba ang pumatay kay Andrew Novou?” Tanong ko habang hawak ang namumula kong braso.

Matiim niya akong tiningnan. It could be a No or a Yes. “Wala ka ring katanungan.”

I tsked. Kailangan kong malaman! Kung mamamatay ako, at least sa huling pagkakataon ay mabigyan ko ng kasagutan ang tanong na gumugulo sa utak ko. And why the caution anyway if he’s still gonna kill me in the end? Why be careful if I’m at his mercy?

“Did you kill him? Are you gonna kill me, too?” Nagulat ako sa pagkulong ng mga palad niya sa aking leeg. Tila gigil na gigil na siyang patayin ako. But it didn’t hurt. He’s not choking me, but the situation still looked brutal and I’m the pathetic one.

“Don’t you ever accuse me of killing someone! Hindi ko pinatay si Novou! In fact, he was the one who tried to kill me! At kahit gustung-gusto na kitang patayin, I won’t. Cause your blood don’t deserve it. You’re not worthy of the last good part of me!”

This time, I was certainly shocked. Hindi niya pinatay si Novou. Pinagtangkaan ng isang cute na nerd ang buhay ng isang gang leader. At ipinagmamayabang niya sa akin ang natitira niyang kabutihan. And since I’m not worth it, he’s not gonna kill me. Should I believe in him?

But I know better so instead, I looked directly into his dark eyes. “But you’re a liar.” Mahina kong sabi. He let go of my neck at itinuon ang paningin sa malawak na paligid. He seemed disappointed.

“Andrew Novou is a weak kid. A school loser! Paano niya pagtatangkaan ang buhay mo?” Dagdag kong sabi. Well, I’m not an easy-believer. I will always have questions.

“The fire on the dorm. I should have been in that room. I love to read on vacant places at doon ako palaging pumupunta. Pero nakasalubong ko si Ethan at nagyaya siyang maglaro ng XBox kaya bumalik kami sa kwarto namin ni Makki. And then the fire started. And it started on that vacant, locked room,” wika niya matapos kong makita ang konting pag-aalangan. Crap! He should be saying this to Detective Penber and defend himself.

“Andrew isn’t weak nor is he a loser. He’s an assassin and that was just his cover. The mafia had investigated everything.” So that explains the masked men in Tuxedo sa Nightwoods. Nung gabi rin palang iyon ay alam na nilang buhay ni Van ang target ng sunog.

“And so you killed him! Or your mafia killed him!” I really can’t stomach the idea of Van being a murderer. Hindi ko matanggap. I hate Van pero ayokong maging isa siyang mamamatay-tao.

Isinuklay niya ang daliri niya sa kaniyang buhok. He’s frustrated with me. “Damn it, Summer Leondale! I should have known that you’re stupid and hard-headed! No, I’ve always known that! Pero malala ka pala!” He said. “The mafia concealed everything from me! Kaya wala akong maisasagot sa iyo!”

“Really! But you are a FRENIERE!”

“And I’m living in Montello High dormitory. I’m just a f cking student!” Sagot niya. It does not make any sense. Ang master ng mafia ay walang alam sa ginagawa ng mafia niya. Pero bigla kong naalala ang sinabi nina Jamie tungkol sa hindi pagpayag ni Van na maki-alam ang Mafia sa school. Ibinaling ko ang paningin ko sa paligid. Para sa tulad kong walang paki-alam sa iniisip ng iba, iniisip ko tuloy kung masyado ba akong naging judgmental.

“I don’t really know the details, true. Pero kapag iniisip kong may kinalaman ang pamilya mo sa nangyari, hindi ko mapigilan na husgahan ka

dahil sa pangalan mo. Ayokong maniwala pero isinisigaw ng isip ko na napakasama mong tao. And I don't want to care about it." I felt a little bit guilty kaya nasabi ko ang mga ito.

Hindi niya ako nilingon. Nakatingin lang siya sa malayo nang muling magsalita. "Does it matter to you if I'm bad or not?"

I was caught off guard. Bumilis din ang tibok ng puso ko. "I— I don't know." Does it matter to me? Hindi ko alam. Masyadong malabo ang nararamdaman ko. Vague. Hindi ko malagyan ng pangalan. "Ang labo ng lahat," naibulong ko.

For a fleeting moment, tiningnan niya ako ng tila isang kumplikadong ekspresyon bago siya muling tumingin sa malayo. "Cause if it does matter to you, Summer, then I'll become that pathetic person who'll helplessly explain that I really don't know anything about it. And I don't want to see myself become pathetic. So I really hope it does not matter to you. I don't even know why it matters to me but you really shouldn't care about anything concerning me at all." All I can do at that moment was to stare at him. Even from this angle, he is still dangerously perfect.

"And where did you get the idea that I care about you? I certainly don't!" I said harshly. Being sarcastic and violent to conceal whatever it is that I am feeling. It was uncertain. Kapag mas lalo kong sinusubukang bigyang linaw, mas lalo naman akong naguguluhan.

"Yeah. That's better." He smirked. Mas okay nang bumalik ang nakakainis na ngiting iyon kaysa sa atmosphere kanina.

"You're not gonna kill me?" Tanong ko matapos ang ilang sandali.

"Maybe I will. On my own time and terms," wika niya. Mukhang may pag-asa pa na mapahaba ng kahit papaano ang buhay ko. I might still survive this bloody day.

"If I'm not gonna die today, I'd rather go back to Montello," wika ko. Naisip ko rin kung ano na ang nangyari kina Jamie at Mirden. Sa wakas ay

nilingon ni Van ang direksyon ko at diretsong tumingin sa aking mga mata. There’s a glint of something wicked in his eyes.

“You got it wrong. I’m staying here until tomorrow.” Hindi na nawala ang smirk na naka-plaster sa gwapo niyang mukha. Hindi ko na maitago ang shock at iritasyon na nararamdaman ko.

Kinuyom ko ang aking kamao. “How about me? I can’t stay in here any longer! This place will suffocate me to death! This is hell!” Kahit gaano pa kaganda ang mansyon nila, teritoryo pa rin ito ng mafia.

He touched my cheek. I blushed and he laughed. Dang it! I smacked his hand away and gave him a deadly stare.

“Stay with me and you’ll be safe,” he said. Ugh! Yeah, I’ll be safe! But he’s a liar! And he’s the one I wanted to escape from the most! Tss!

[11] Chapter 11: Dark Fairytale

Author’s Note:

Late update again. Haha.Sorry about that but I got sick last week so I wasn’t able to do watty. But here’s Dark Fairytale and you might want to check this songs:

Skinny Love – Birdie

It Ends Tonight – All American Rejects

Safe and Sound – Taylor Swift

haha. Cause this chapter was inspired by those songs and I think it’ll add up to the scenes if the readers would silently play these on their minds. .^ And really thanks for those who wait and those who left me words to update. And to the votes and added fans and readers, too. really felt awkward while saying fans Haha. And it’s here now. Well, you could also suggest those songs that’ll suit this chapter through comments. At sa mga sumunod sa

aking kapalaran at kasalukuyang may sakit ngayon, curse the weather changes! Pagaling kayo. Be well. ·

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 11: Dark Fairytale

“The Night is darkening around me,

The wild winds coldly blow,

But a tyrant spell has bound me,

And I can not, can not go.”

-Emily Bronte

Halos nakikita ko sa aking imahinasyon ang pag-aagawan nila ng kawawang cellphone. Hindi pa rin nawawala ang panic sa boses nila. Tumingin ako sa kalangitang naliliwanagan ng mga bituin habang hinihintay kong kumalma sila sa kabilang linya. Nasa veranda ako ng isang malaking kuwarto na pinagdalhan sa akin ni Van. He told me to stay here and not to wander around kung wala siya sa paningin ko. There’ll be no excuse for the Mafia not to kill me.

“Are you sure you’re fine? Walang katabing goons na nag-uutos sayo para sabihing okay ka lang?” Tinig ni Jamie.

“Miracle exists!” Narinig kong dagdag ni Mirden.

“Yes. Van Freniere came and dealt with them.” They fell silent at the mention of the devil. I heard another noise and then Mirden’s voice.

“Pero totoo ba na may kinalaman ang mafia---”

“I don’t know. And don’t ever mention about it publicly. Alam kong naiintindihan niyo ang pwedeng mangyari.”

“Naiintindihan namin. You’re really fine? No need to call the police? So nasaan ka na? Pabalik ka na ba ng school?” Tanong ni Mirden.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. It’s already dark,” sagot ko.

“Are you with him right now?”

Tama bang sabihin ko sa kanila na kasama ko ang Gang Leader ng Black Government? Well, probably yes. Para kung sakaling may mangyari sa akin, may taong pwede silang i-link sa kaso ko. I don’t want to be one of those unsolved murder cases… Stay with me and you’ll be safe. Halos naririnig ko pa rin ang boses niya nang sabihin niya iyon. Should I trust him?

“Yes. And we’ll be back tomorrow. Sa ngayon, he’s the safest person to be with outside Montello High. I’m gonna trust the devil just this once,” wika ko. I will take the risk. I don’t have a choice. Kung tatangkain kong umalis dito, baka palabas pa lang ako ng kwartong ito, may order nang shoot to kill para sa akin.

“Take care, Summer. At salamat para kanina---”

“I’m gonna hang up now. Bye.”

“Sum---”

Pinindot ko na ang end key ng cellphone ko. Bakit ko nga ba sila iniligtas kanina? I’m a selfish bitch so why did I make that heroic stunt? Maybe I’m not so bad after all. Maybe Van is not that devil after all. And yet everything about him is still too mysterious for me. He’s like a puzzle with missing pieces. It’s complicated.

“Your stupid bestfriends might be so worried.” Agad akong napalingon sa direksyon ng sliding glass door. Kelan pa siya nakatayo doon? Kanina pa ba siya nakikinig sa pakikipag-usap ko sa telepono?

“Bestfriends? You’re kidding, right? What’s with the eavesdropping anyway? Afraid that I might call the police?” I crossed my arms.

Nagkibit-balikat naman siya. “I was just asking. And no, hindi ko iniisip na tatawag ka ng pulis. You’re too selfish and eccentric to risk your life. But still, ang ipinagtataka ko ay ang katangahang ginawa mo kanina para lang iligtas ang bestfriends mo.” Kinowt pa niya sa hangin ang salitang bestfriends nang banggitin niya ito.

Hindi ko malaman kung paano ko sasagutin ang sinabi ni Van. He really have his way of catching me off-guard. In the end, I decided to give him a vague answer.

“Of course, I know that I’m the luckiest and the unluckiest thing that ever existed.” I said with a smirk. Bigla namang sumeryoso ang mukha niya and stepped closer to my direction. I stepped back.

“Don’t ever do that again.” He stared directly into my eyes. No one can capture me as easy as those eyes… those pair of orbs.

“Why not?” Tanong ko.

“Just don’t.” Patuloy pa rin siya sa paglapit at patuloy rin ako sa pag-atras. Hanggang sa maramdaman ko na ang malamig na semento ng veranda sa matataas na bahagi ng aking likod. He trapped me again with his arms… Darn. This is getting too common! And my freaking heart is beating freaking faster. I pushed one hand to his chest just to create distance. Why is he doing this anyway?

“Stay away, jerk,” mahina kong sabi. Hindi ko na kailangang isigaw iyon sa kanya dahil masyado siyang malapit.

“You’re blushing.”

And then I caught my breath. He smirked again! The nerve of him to smirk at my expense! Darn! Right now, I’m really frustrated with myself. Why am I acting this way?! But if this is a game, then I must at least try not to be defeated.

“Because it’s already night and cold. It’s normal, you, idiot,” I snapped at him.

Tumawa siya. And this laugh is different from all his other laughs so far that were painted with mockery. It's quite an enchanting sound that rings on the air. And it's new. So what? Nababaliw na siya?

"So I'm wrong! And it isn't true!" Wika niya.

"It's true. You're becoming a mad man," naiiling kong sabi. That's bad news.

"I'm mentally fine. But I always felt so damned tuwing iniisip ko na wala akong epekto sayo. It's normal for girls to get affected by me. I decided that maybe you got a gender crisis. But the way you just blush around me? The way you silently react when I'm this near…" Alam ko ang ipinupunto niya. And I was shocked and stunned. This self-conceited jerk thinks that I like him! Goodness gracious!

"It's normal to be tensed when you're closer than necessary to a jerk. I hate to break all your guts and crash your ego but I don't really like you. You certainly don't interest me," wika ko in a flat tone. I'm still tensed and shocked. But I'm a control freak of everything, even with my emotions. Kaya ko iyong itago at magsuot ng maskara.

He looked at me in disbelief. Mukhang effective ang aking pagkukunwari. Okay, I might be blushing around him— darn it— but that doesn't mean I like him!

"I don't believe you. You got the same hormones like those other girls."

Nagkibit-balikat ako. "Wala akong pakielam sa kung anong nais mong paniwalaan." My heart was beating faster again than ordinary. More of this and I think I'm gonna suffer from heart attack.

Nagulat na lang ako nang hawakan niya ang waist ko at buhatin paupo sa pasamano. What the hell! Nasa ikaapat na palapag ang verandang ito. Nawala na ang blush sa mukha ko. And with a paled face, I looked down. I'm gonna be dead if I ever fall.

“Van Freniere! Ano sa tingin mo ang ginagawa mo!” Muli kong ibinaling ang tingin ko sa kanya. And he’s just staring at my face. Wala akong choice kundi humawak sa balikat niya.

“It’s one creative way of saying I don’t like you, too.”

I gritted my teeth. He made his point. Hindi na niya kailangang iparamdam sa akin ang pagiging on the edge of falling.

“Fine! We don’t like each other! Ibaba mo na ako,” utos ko sa kanya.

Umiling siya at tumingin sa paligid. “And giving you a better view.”

I was quite astonished with his sudden seriousness. Muli ay inilibot ko ang paningin ko sa paligid. Ngayon ko lang napansin na tila napapaligiran ako ng mga bituin dahil sa mga ilawan sa di-kalayuan. Ang maliwanag na asul na swimming pool, ang mga puno na lumilikha ng kakaibang mga anino, ang maliwanag at malaking fountain, at ang makatawag-pansing exterior design ng bahay.

And then the real stars above me on this dark night are really enchanting. They were like thousands, millions of wishes waiting to come true. Even the crescent moon is smiling down at me… at us. It was like I got every wonderful things this night could offer. And there’s this ravishing and gorgeous dark angel standing with me on this gothic porch, holding me firmly like he’s not gonna let me fall.

“So why are you showing me these things?” Tanong ko. Muli siyang tumingin sa akin. Nakatingin lang siya at akala ko ay wala na naman siyang balak sagutin ang tanong ko. Pero ilang sandali lang ay narinig kong muli ang malalim niyang boses.

“I call it hospitality for the only guest I ever had in my house.” Again, I was surprised. So, ako pa lang pala ang nakapasok sa mansion na ito bukod sa mga miyembro ng mafia nila Van? Well, no smart person would ever want to risk their lives by actually going in this mansion. And of course, I’m just plain unlucky.

“Sebastian could scare the living sh t out of anyone. Who in their right minds would want to face that kind of danger?” Ayokong i-mock ang hosting capability nila but hell, they’re poor on it.

“I know my brother isn’t so nice. So am I.”

I inhaled sharply. “Kapatid mo talaga siya?” I mean, paano pinayagan ng ecosystem na magkaroon ng dalawang nakakatakot na halimaw sa isang bahay? That’s imbalance!

He smirked. “You should meet my family.”

I frowned. “No, thanks,” sagot ko. Mahal ko pa ang buhay ko.

Mas sinecure niya ang kapit sa baywang ko. It was like he’s hugging me but of course he’s not.

“Bakit hindi mo subukang bitawan ang balikat ko at i-spread ang arms mo? It will feel like flying on this cold air.”

I considered the suggestion. Should I trust him? Paano kung ilaglag niya ako?

Tila nabasa niya ang iniisip ko. “Trust me,” wika niya.

Trust me. Well, maybe I should. Binitiwan ko ang balikat niya and I raised my arms in the dark. Mas naramdaman ko ang malamig na hangin. It’s scary but it feels good. Like I’m free and I’m taller than everything. Screw my beloved Titanic movie but I’m never gonna scream I’m the queen of the world although I certainly feel like it.

“Better?” Tumango ako. We stayed like that for a long moment. Mesmerized by all these wonderful sights and sensation of freedom. I was completely captured.

Then suddenly, I felt awkward with the situation. Kahit sa panaginip, hindi ko naisip na we could be like this. Well, tonight, it actually felt good to be with him. Hindi ko lang inaasahan na it could be this nice. Since all I think

of him is a chaos, a nightmare, a devil… and lately, a criminal. Which I still badly hope he's not. Despite his claims, hindi ko pa rin maiwasan magduda.

"Y-you missed English class. You should read Frankenstein," I stuttered. I just need to say something to ease the tension.

"Was that your way of saying that I'm a monster?" Tanong niya. He is a monster but he is no Frankenstein's creature. He's perfect.

"I've always known that you're a monster. Sinasabi ko lang naman na kailangan mong basahin ang Frankenstein," sagot ko. Saglit siyang napa-isip.

"Hateful day that I received life! Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?"

My mouth gaped open. Did he just quote the book? Muling siyang nagpatuloy.

"...God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image, but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred."

"Wow, so you didn't just read it! You have it memorized!" Komento ko.

"No. Meron lang akong super photographic memory," sagot niya. Sasagot pa sana akong muli subalit isang itim na Limousine na may mga escort na Cadillac ang pinagbuksan ng gate ng mga naka-tuxedong lalaki sa ibaba ang nakatawag ng aking pansin. Naramdaman kong nagkatensyon si Van nang tumingin siya sa ibaba. There must be something wrong.

"Bakit siya narito?" Mahinang wika ni Van.

"Sino?" Tanong ko. Hindi siya sumagot. Binuksan ng mga naka-itim na tuxedo ang pinto ng Limousine at lumabas ang isang matangkad na lalaki. I couldn't see the details of his face since nasa ika-apat na palapag ako ng mansiyon.Van lifted me off the porch and brought me to my feet.

“It’s time for dinner,” wika niya at hinawakan ako sa braso. Iginiya niya ako papasok ng kwarto.

“What’s in that bag?” Tinuro niya ang pink at cute paper bag na nakalagay sa kama. It’s the dress that Jamie bought for me. It’s a decent and casual blue cocktail dress.

“Dress,” sagot ko.

“Good. Isuot mo yan ngayon.” Napanganga ako. Ano ito? Dinner lang and I have to wear a dress? Is it a formal dinner? And why is it formal anyway? At isa pa, I’m on my converse shoes. I don’t think it complements the dress. Mukhang nabasa ni Van ang pag-aalinlangan sa mukha ko kaya kinuha niya ang paperbag at iniabot sa akin.

“Pumunta ka na sa banyo at isuot mo yan. Or do you want me to undress you myself? I’ll be willing to do so. All you need to do is ask.” Isang masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko sa kaniya at marahas na kinuha ang bag at nagtungo sa banyo. Pinapainit ng pesteng iyon ang ulo ko.

Mabilis kong isinuot ang dress. It’s really pretty and a perfect fit for me. I should learn to trust Jamie’s fashion sense. Ang kailangan ko na lang gawin ay itaas ang buhok ko and apply thin make-up. Luckily, dala ko pa rin naman ang maliit na bagpack na naglalaman ng mga gamit ko. Now, I definitely look good.

I saw surprise and how the way I look made Van hang his mouth open paglabas ko. Nakita ko ang glint of admiration sa mata niya nang tumingin siya sa mukha ko at sa damit. It gave me confidence, actually. Until his eyes reached my converse shoes and he let out a sly smile.

“Nice shoes,” komento niya.

“It’s a flying shoes. Kayang-kaya nitong lumipad sa mukha mo,” sarkastiko kong sagot.

Umiling siya at hinawakan ang braso ko. “Let’s go.”

After walking through the hallway and large staircase, we arrived at the door of the dining room. Crap! Am I gonna have dinner with the monsters? Isang babaeng nakaumiporme ang nagbukas ng pinto. Pumasok kami ni Van and I saw plenty of mouth-watering food na nakahain sa malaking mesa na pinalilibutan ng malalaking upuan. Fiesta! At nakita ko rin si Sebastian na nakaupo at nakatingin sa amin. Nasa gitnang bahagi naman ang isang lalaking mukhang nasa late 40's at walang ekspresyon. Mababakas pa rin sa anggulo ng mukha nito ang kagwapuhan kahit sa katandaan nito. He must be the gentleman inside that Limousine. Iginiya ako ni Van palapit sa mesa at ipinaghila ng upuan. Umupo ako roon at saka siya umupo sa katabing silya.

"Sir Freniere," address ni Van sa matandang lalaki. Matiim lang siya nitong tinitigan.

"Giovanni," sagot nito at saka tumingin sa direksyon ko. "Isa itong pambihirang pagkakataon. You just brought the first sweet lady in the mansion."

Mahinang tawa ang pinawalan ni Sebastian. "The lady's fine. But still, a converse-type of young girl," wika niya. I gritted my teeth.

"She's Summer Leondale. Sa Montello High rin siya pumapasok. And Summer," tumingin ako kay Van as he said, "Sir Algernon Freniere, my father." Now, this is a shocking news! Kaharap ko ngayon ang ama ni Van which means ang ulo ng Freniere Mafia. Pero bakit Sir ang tawag ni Van sa kaniya? Why not Daddy? Or Papa? or.. whatever?

"Good evening, Sir," bati ko. Tumango lang siya. Walang imik na sinimulan namin ang pagkain. This is so awkward. Eating with them in a grand dinner room is a torture. Mukhang wala silang pakialam sa presensya ng bawat isa. Wala ring kibo ang mga unipormadong maids at chef sa likuran namin. Para akong nasa Transylvania, sa kastilo ni Count Dracula. And these monsters are his brothers.

"So how is the transaction, Sebastian?" Ikinagulat ko ang pagbasag ni Algernon Freniere sa katahimikan. Ang buong akala ko ay mananatiling tahimik ang lahat hanggang sa matapos ang napaka-awkward na dinner na

ito. Ibinaba ni Sebastian ang kaniyang mga kubyertos at itinuon ang paningin sa ama. Bakas sa ikinikilos niya ang malaking respetong ibinibigay niya kay Algernon Freniere. Patuloy naman si Van sa pagkain.

“Hindi maganda ang naging resulta. May naging problema kasi sa lugar ng tagpuan. At iyon ay ang pamamasyal roon ng tatlong ignoranteng babae na estudyante ng Montello High,” sagot ni Sebastian at tinapunan nya ako ng masamang tingin. Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko at ginantihan ko rin siya ng matalim na sulyap. Mukhang kailangan kong kontrolin ang sarili ko sa harap ng mga taong ito kung gusto kong lumayo sa kapahamakan.

“Sa susunod, gusto kong maging perpekto ang lahat. Milyong halaga ang nawawala sa atin tuwing hindi naibibigay ang mga armas sa tamang oras,” wika ng matanda.

Armas? Malamang ilegal na mga armas ang pinag-uusapan nila at ayokong mapunta sa ganitong sitwasyon— ang malagay sa gitna ng usapan tungkol sa mga ilegal na bagay na pwede kong isuplong sa mga pulis. Tumingin ako sa direksyon ni Van. Mukhang wala pa rin siyang pakialam sa paligid.

“Let’s kill her and everything will be perfect,” tukoy sa akin ni Sebastian. I’m terribly shocked! Pati ba naman sa hapag-kainan, pagtatangkaan niya pa rin ang buhay ko? Muli ay di ko nagawang manahimik na lang.

“Is that the most brilliant idea you can come up with? Halatang hindi ka sanay sa problem-solving at stress-management---” Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko dahil isang lumilipad na bread knife ang patungo sa akin. Ang unang reaksyon ko ay yumuko subalit bago pa man ako magpanic ay nakita ko ang mabilis at eleganteng pagsalo ni Van sa kutsilyo. Mabilis siyang nakalapit sa akin na tila inaasahan na niya ang mangyayari.

“I told you, Sebastian. She’s mine,” seryosong wika ni Van, almost like a lion’s growl. Nagsalubong ang paningin nilang magkapatid na tila walang gustong magpatalo. Crap! Napakabilis ng pangyayari. Kung hindi dahil kay Van, baka bumulagta na ang bangkay ko sa sahig. That Sebastian is a real monster!

“Kailan niyo ba balak matutunan ang table manners? Mga anak, ngayon ko lang kayo nakasalo sa hapunan. At isa pa, nakakahiya sa ating bisita,” wika ni Algernon Freniere.

Bumalik si Van sa upuan subalit iniurong nya ito ng mas malapit sa akin. Sebastian stabbed the steak with his fork harshly.

“But, Sir Freniere, Van is interrupting with my business. At ano bang balak niyang gawin sa babaeng iyan? She’s not that hot to become one of his whore.”

“I’m not a whore!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, really, converse girl?” He gave me a malicious smile which I returned with a glare. Nagulat ako nang hawakan ni Van ang pisngi ko at iharap ako sa direksyon niya.

“Can’t you just pretend that he’s not here?” Mahina niyang wika.

I gritted my teeth. “Hindi ko kayang manahimik lalo na at harap-harapan akong binabastos ng isang mamamatay-tao!” Sagot ko na ikinagulat ng lahat. Kung posible nga lang na tumigil din ang pag-ikot ng mundo. Tila pinalakas naman ng katahimikan ang loob ko at itinuloy ko ang akusasyon. “Kung ikaw ang kumikilos sa mafia, sabihin mo sa akin, bakit kailangan mong paslangin si Andrew Novou? Isa lang siyang estudyante!” Matapang kong saad. Ilang saglit ang lumipas bago muling nagsalita si Sebastian.

“It’s the Punishment. He tried to kill one of the most important people in the mafia.”

“Pinatay mo nga siya,” muli kong wika. Isa ba itong pag-amin?

“If I were you, I’m gonna shut my mouth and swallow all the stupidity,” sagot ni Sebastian. Hindi ang linyang iyon ang makakapagpatigil sa akin lalo pa’t nasimulan ko na ang pagtatanong. Alam kong kailangan kong manahimik kung gusto ko pang magpatuloy ang buhay ko. Pinaalalahan na ako ni Van kanina. But I just can’t! Hindi mawala sa isipan ko ang nakakaawang hitsura ni Andrew Novou noong gabing natagpuan ang

bangkay niya. No one deserves to die like that! That's too brutal… too harsh… too inhuman.

"Pero bakit kailangan nyo siyang pahirapan? Can't he just die in the quickest and painless way?" Yes. Cause honestly, that's how I prefer to die. Ayokong masira ang mukha ko o magkaroon ng dislocation ang mga body parts ko. I wanna be whole when I'm gone.

"Shut up or I'll stuff your damn mouth with all the food here! Bitch! Why can't you just go with Van upstairs and show him how a cheap and useless whore you are!"

Sh t! How dare he talk to me like that?! I looked at him, shocked and wide-eyed. Nang magregister sa akin ang lahat ng sinabi niya, tumayo ako hawak ang isang baso ng wine at isinaboy iyon sa mukha niya. Everyone was shocked except from Algernon who seemed to be enjoying his dinner. Tinabig ni Sebastian ang mga pagkain sa harap niya at saka bumunot ng baril. Naging mabilis naman ang reaksyon ni Van kaya bago pa man maitutok ng kapatid niya ang baril sa akin at kalabitin ito ay naibato na niya ng ubod-lakas ang isang mansanas sa kamay ni Sebastian, dahilan upang mabitiwan nito ang baril. Muli sanang daramputin ni Sebastian ang baril subalit napahinto kaming lahat sa pinaka-nakakakilabot at tila may nakaambang kamatayan na tinig ni Algernon Freniere. No one had ever freezed and scared me like that voice!

"Waste more food and I will kill you!" Puno ng awtoridad na wika ng nakatatandang Freniere. I just stared at him.

"Pero, Sir Algernon, ang babaeng iyan---" Tutol ni Sebastian.

"Maupo ka, Sebastian. O magiging lumpo ka na habang buhay." Atubiling sumunod si Sebastian at naupo sa upuan niya. Ganun na rin ang ginawa ko dahil tila nanghina ang tuhod ko sa naramdaman kong takot kanina. Tanging sina Algernon at Van lang ang nakapagpatuloy sa pagkain habang sinusubukan akong patayin ni Sebastian ng matatalim niyang tingin.

"Pasensya ka na, Summer, sa inasal ng aking mga anak. Hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit sa kapanahunan ngayon ay hindi na uso ang

pagiging maginoo.” Hindi ko magawang sumagot. Nakatingin lang ako sa direksyon niya. “At sa iyo naman, Sebastian, hindi ba’t sinabi ko sa’yo na turuan mo lang ng leksyon ang assassin ng kapatid mo? Hindi kita pinahintulutan na patayin ang taong iyon. Alam kong matindi ang pagnanais mong patayin si Andrew Novou pero kailangan mong tanggapin na hindi na nun maibabalik ang buhay ng iyong ina.”

“Hindi ko matanggap na isang tulad lang niya ang---” Hindi itinuloy ni Sebastian ang kaniyang sasabihin. Isa lang ang malinaw. Wala na ang ina sa pamilya ng Freniere.

“Kung ganun, sinuway mo ako?” Tanong ni Algernon.

“Sinunod ko ang ipinag-utos nyo. Umayon lang ang lahat sa plano,” wika ni Sebastian.

“Anong plano?” Tanong ni Van. Tumingin sa kaniya si Sebastian.

“Buhay ka pa, mahal kong kapatid. At dahil hindi ka niya napatay, awtomatikong buhay niya ang kapalit nun. Alam mong hindi tumatanggap ng pagkatalo ang kalaban natin.”

What? So hindi si Sebastian ang pumatay kay Andrew Novou? Nagfreak-out lang ako? Kung ganun, ilang araw din pala akong mukhang tanga. No wonder na patuloy sa pagtawag sa akin ng ignorante at stupid ang Sebastian na ito!

“B-But the crest! It’s a Freniere Crest! Tyler told me---”

“Kilala mo si Tyler?” Tanong ni Algernon. Atubili akong tumango.

“Of course! Ipinabibigay namin ang crest sa boss niya,” wika ni Sebastian.

“At sa maling kamay iyon nakarating,” dagdag ni Van.

“Alam kong nakuha ng mga hangal na iyon ang ating mensahe,” wika ni Algernon.

“And what am I gonna do with the police? Ako si Van Freniere at isang Freniere Mafia Crest ang nakita sa bangkay ni Novou. Ano sa tingin niyo ang magiging hinala nila?” Tanong ni Van.

“Why can’t you just kill those people who bother you?” Tanong ni Sebastian. What the hell is he?! Talo pa niya ang pusa sa pagiging murderous ang utak! I hate Detective Penber but I don’t want him dead.

“Harapin mo sila at maging normal. Katulad ng normal mong ginagawa at sila mismo ang susuko,” wika ni Algernon. Well, I know it’s possible for Van na magmanipula ng tao kahit alagad ng batas. Biglang sumeryoso ang mukha ng matanda at tumingin ng diretso kay Sebastian.

“Ang listahan. Nilagyan mo na ba ng mga pulang marka ang mga walang kwentang nilalang?”

“Tungkol doon---” Pinutol ni Van ang anupamang sasabihin ni Sebastian ng marahas na pagtayo at paghila sa braso ko mula sa aking kinauupuan.

“Tapos na kami. Maiwan na namin kayo.”

What? Limang kutsara pa lang ng pagkain ang naisubo ko.

“Yeah, right. Let her hear this and she’ll die,” mahinang wika ni Sebastian na nahagip ng aking pandinig. Tumango lang si Algernon at iniwan na namin ang mesa. Lumuwag ng kaunti ang pagkakapit ni Van sa braso ko habang paakyat na kami sa maluwang at engrandeng hagdan.

Napakaganda talaga ng mansyon. Yun nga lang, kaunti lang yata ang mga nananatili rito at hindi pa sila pakalat-kalat sa paligid. Mukhang kahit ang mga taga-silbi ay natatakot na maglakad sa mansyon para sa kanilang buhay. It’s more like a gothic fairytale than that one which every girl dreams of. Nang nasa tapat na ako ng kwartong pinanatilihan ko kanina ay agad akong pumasok at isinara ang pinto. Wala akong maisip na sabihin kay Van. Isa akong baliw na hayok sa pag-aakusa. Parang hinusgahan ko na rin ang pagkatao niya. Buti na lang din at hindi na niya naisip pang mameste sa loob ng kwarto.

Nagbihis akong muli ng suot ko kanina. Humiga ako sa kama at sinubukang matulog. Subalit lumipas ang minuto at oras ay gising pa rin ang diwa ko. Masyadong maraming nangyari para sa isang araw. Ilang beses ba akong muntik mamatay sa araw na ito?

Bumukas ang pinto at naramdaman ko ang pagpasok ng isang tao. Nagconcentrate ako sa pagpikit ng aking mga mata at pagkukunwaring tulog. I don't really know what to do if that person came to kill me. Huminto ang taong iyon sa harap ng kama na kinaroroonan ko. Crap! Bigla akong na-conscious sa hitsura ko. I forgot to turn the light off. Mamamatay na lang rin ako, naiisip ko pa ang hitsura ko.

"Madali kong nalalaman kung ang isang tao ay mahimbing nang natutulog, nagtutulug-tulugan o wala nang buhay." Bigla akong napaupo sa kama dahil sa boses na iyon. What is he doing here? Well, obviously, to kill me!

"S-Sebastian Freniere," kinakabahan kong wika.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty." He smirked. Gawd! He is really Van's brother! Hinawakan niya ang magkabila kong braso and pinned them above my head. "I came here for your life, your soul and everything you are."

I was shocked and scared. "Ano'ng ibig mong sabihin?"

He leaned down to my neck and kissed me there! I started to really panic! Anong binabalak niya? Is he planning to do what I think he would? I'd rather quickly die than be humiliated by him! Oh God, help me! All the Roman and Greek gods and goddesses! Help me! Buddha! Allah! HELP!!!

Pinilit kong magpumiglas. "Get off me!" Gawd! Kung mamamatay ako sa pagpupumiglas ay tatanggapin ko. But he's just too strong! And he's not yet leaving my neck! I started to feel the tears from my eyes as it ran down my cheeks. I am so scared. Terribly scared. This is worse than death! I couldn't control it anymore… and I screamed.

"VAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!" I screamed his name. I could hear the fear in my voice. And then I felt Sebastian smiled at my neck! What does that mean! That's weird!

Ilang segundo lang ang lumipas at marahas na bumukas ang pinto. I glanced towards it. Nakita ko ang pagrehistro ng matinding galit sa mukha ni Van nang makita nya ang sitwasyon. He quickly approached us and pulled Sebastian away from me, harshly and full of strength. He threw a fist to his older brother's face. Me, I'm still scared. Nanginginig ang buong katawan ko pero hindi ko pa rin maiwasang magulat sa naging reaksyon ni Van.

"You dared to f cking touch her!" Galit niyang sigaw habang hawak sa T-shirt si Sebastian at muli nya itong sinuntok. Sebastian landed on the floor pero hindi siya gumanti. Agad akong lumapit kay Van at nanginginig na humawak sa laylayan ng manggas ng T-shirt niya. I just needed someone to hold on. Kahit sa manggas lang ng taong iyon. Van looked at me and pulled me against his chest. It only made me sob harder.

"Sebastian!" Nagtatangis ang mga bagang na wika ni Van. Naramdaman kong nanginginig din siya. Dahil sa galit? Sebastian just laughed! How dare he! I want to kill him!

"Relax! I just wanted to find out something," wika ni Sebastian habang hawak ang panga.

"Find out something!" Nanggigilalas kong wika. He's impossible! Tumawa muli si Sebastian.

"Yes. And I'm not gonna rape you. I got a lot of hotter girls than you." I glared at him. Kung wala siyang masamang balak then why did he do that?! He scared the hell out of me!

"I get it, Van. That's bad news," wika niya kay Van at saka tumingin sa akin. Ano'ng ibig niyang sabihin?

"Get out or I won't be able to control myself and kill you!" Galit pa ring wika ni Van. Itinaas ni Sebastian ang dalawang kamay bilang pagsuko. Nakangiti siyang naglakad patungo sa pinto.

"By the way, soft neck. Nice perfume," nakangiti nitong komento. All I did was stare at him with my mouth open in disbelief. What the hell! Crap!

Sana mawala ang life existence niya! Isusulat ko ang pangalang Sebastian Freniere sa Deathnote! I curse him to death!!!

“And by the way, you two should see what a pretty picture you are making, cuddled like that.” Humalakhak pa siya na tila amused na amused nang isara ang pinto.

Saka ko lang narealize ang sitwasyon namin ni Van and I pushed him away.

“He is— He is so damned— He’s a freaking--- Moron!” Putul-putol kong sabi.

“Are you okay?” Kalmado nang tanong ni Van. Tumango ako. “Good. I’ll sleep here.”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko sa sinabi niya. “Pero---” Well, kung iisipin ko, I’m not really safe here. And he’s the only person I can trust. Kinuha niya ang malaking unan mula sa kama at nagtungo sa couch. That’s new. Dahil sa pagkakatanda ko, hindi siya pumapayag na matulog sa couch. But that’s a good thing. Cause after what happened, I don’t think na magiging kumportable akong katabi siya. He locked the door and turned on the lampshade. Saka niya pinatay ang maliwanag na chandelier. Dumiretso na siya sa couch at humiga. Nagtungo na rin ako sa kama and warmed myself with the comforter.

“Can’t you say sorry for your brother’s manner?” Mahina kong tanong. Mahabang katahimikan bago siya sumagot.

“I’m not the one who kissed you,” seryoso niyang wika.

Huminga ako ng malalim. It seems like I’m not gonna get any apologies after what happened. Tsk! That Sebastian jerk just kissed me and scared me! At ang nakakainis ay ang pag-iyak ko. It’s been a long time mula nang umiyak ako but for an entirely different reason. And I never received even a simple apology, too. Maybe that’s why hindi rin ako namimigay ng sorry. I sighed again. Same old thing. I got hurt. I got scared. I cried. And no one apologized.

I was about to close my eyes when I heard Van get up from his couch at lumapit sa kama. I just stared at him questioningly. May kailangan ba sya? And then suddenly, surprisingly and without a warning, he leaned down and kissed me lighlty at my neck--- the part Sebastian did not touch.

And then he breathed, “Now, I’m sorry.” Bumalik na siya sa couch at humiga.

I was shocked. But everything’s different compared to what happened just a while ago. I never panicked, just the faster beating of my heart . I didn’t get scared, just that unexplainable and vague pleasure of feeling the touch of his soft lips on my skin. At tila nabura nun ang lahat ng encounter ko with Sebastian at lahat ng stress na dulot ng near-death experience ko kanina. Crap. What’s this?!

“Van?” I silently murmured.

“Hmmmm?” He asked.

“What the hell?” I answered sleepily and he laughed.

Yeah. Can’t I just do goodnights?

[12] Chapter 12: Cats and Curiousity

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“You can’t say anything about the mansion, or about us, or what happened to you last night. Keep everything you’ve seen and heard in your head. That is… if you still want to preserve your useless life.”

Nakatuon lang ang paningin ko sa harap habang nakaupo sa passenger seat ng asul na Bugatti Peyvron ni Van. This jerk doesn’t deserve this heavenly car. Uh. My useless life. Yun ang mga binitiwang salita ni Sebastian bago kami umalis ng mansion. Nakakainis! Gusto kong manakit ng tao! Gusto kong bugbugin ang Tres na yun! Pero siyempre, hindi ako isang Superhuman. May mga limitasyon din ang kakayahan ko. Nakakabadtrip lang yung feeling na wala akong kalaban-laban kay Tres. Na wala man lang

akong nagawa nang bigyan niya ako ng death threat kanina. Gusto ko talagang saktan ang pesteng Sebastian Freniere na yun!

Ikinuyom ko ang aking kamao at tumingin sa driver's seat. Van, in his glorious perfection, is just serious and silent while driving the car. Isa pa itong buwisit na ito. What he did last night is… is so… is so unnecessary. Grr! It really felt wrong to be defenseless. I gritted my teeth. I'm so annoyed with everything! Then without a word, I punched the car window beside me. I heard a silent crack because of the strong impact. But it's not the window that's broken. It's my friggin hand! Damn it! It's a bullet proof car! Crap!

Agad na nagpreno si Van sa pagkagulat sa ginawa ko subalit madali rin niyang naibalik ang focus sa pagmamaneho.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Do you want to break my bloody car?" He cursed. I glared at him habang pinipilit na balewalain ang kirot sa aking kamay. But I just can't ! Damn! Kelan pa ako naging masochist?

"Damn you!" I screamed at him. Crap! My friggin' hand is freaking painful. Tsk! Totoo pala yung naririnig ko about sa sobrang sakit na gusto mo nang mamatay. Van, unaware of my condition, grabbed my right arm harshly. Medyo natatanaw ko na ang Montello High. It's Saturday! Thank God! Marating ko lang ang dorm, mananahimik na ang kaluluwa ko!

"Anumang oras ay hawak ko ang buhay mo kaya ayusin mo ang sarili mo!" Nagtitimping wika ni Van. Hindi niya binitiwan ang braso ko. Mas humigpit lang ang hawak niya habang nagmamaneho ang isa niyang kamay. It brought more pain into my hand.

"Ouch! Damn it! Careful!" Hindi ko natiis at muli ko siyang sinigawan. Napatingin naman siya sa nagda-dark red ko nang kamay. There's something thoughtful that crossed his face then it washed away with blankness. Lumuwag naman ang pagkakakapit niya sa braso ko. Pero hindi niya pa rin iyon binibitawan.

"Tiisin mo yan. You deserved it," seryoso niyang wika. Mas binilisan niya ang pagpapatakbo sa sports car. Sh t! It's like we're on a race! Uh! I

definitely don’t need a car crash! Hinayaan lang kaming makapasok ng guard sa gate. Hindi siya huminto sa tapat ng boy’s dormitory, sa halip ay sa mismong Montello Main Building siya tumigil. Agad siyang lumabas ng kotse. Hahawakan ko pa lang ang handle ng pinto ay agad na niya iyong nabuksan at hinila na ako palabas.

“Jerk!” I hissed. Naglakad—correction— kinaladkad niya ako papasok ng building at huminto kami sa tapat ng school clinic. I looked at him unbelievingly. Dinala niya ako sa school clinic. That’s the most hilarious joke I’ve ever got! Hey people! Van has got a heart!

“Don’t expect me to say thank you because I won’t!” Wika ko.

“That’s just fine. You’re not even welcome anyway,” sagot niya at binuksan ang pinto ng clinic. Isang babaeng school doctor ang lumapit sa amin. She’s on her 40’s but she still look beautiful. Napaka-kalmado ng aura niya.

“What happened?” Tanong ng doktor.

“She got some sprains on her body and a broken hand. She was trying to learn how to ride a bicycle yesterday. Pero wala talaga siyang sense of balance kaya…” Sagot ni Van.

Liar! Tsk!

Pinaupo niya ako sa isang puting kama at tiningnan ang ilang pasa na natamo ko mula sa mga street gangster kahapon at ang kamay mula sa pakikipag-away ko sa bullet proof na kotse ni Van.

“These should be painful. Just stay here until lunch, okay? I gotta make sure na magiging okay ang kamay mo.” I nodded. That would be a good idea. Ayokong mag-entertain ng tanong mula kina Jamie at Mirden.

There’s a short knock on the door and it opened. Ethan looked at Van disapprovingly. Inilibot niya ang paningin niya sa kwarto hanggang sa makita niya ako. Agad siyang nagtungo sa direksyon ko. He touched me on my shoulder.

“Summer, are you okay?” Uh. And I thought I’m gonna escape interrogations.

“I’m alive,” bored kong sagot.

“She’s fine,” wika ni Van na nakalapit na rin sa amin. Bumalik na rin ang ang dangerous glint sa kaniyang mga mata.

“How could she be fine if you brought her in that place?!” Nawala ang kalmadong ekspresyon ni Ethan. Ngayon ko lang siya nakitang nagalit ng ganito.

“Ethan, I’m fine,” wika ko.

“You’re not! Look at youself. You’re not fine,” wika ni Ethan habang nakatingin sa injured kong kamay.

“You’re over reacting, Ethan. She did that to herself. That’s her fault. If she’s not stupid then she wouldn’t get that.” I tsked. Tinawag na naman akong stupid ng mokong na si Van. Let’s see. I flinched and stared at my injured hand.

“I—I was just trying to explain myself to him pero he broke my hand dahil hindi niya matanggap na nagkamali siya. He’s the stupid one.” Ha! If he could invent a lie, then I could also fake one. Agad na nilapitan ni Ethan si Van at itinulak sa balikat. Uh-oh. This smells like trouble.

“You did that to her?!” Galit na wika ni Ethan.

Agad na umawat ang school doctor sa namumuong tensyon. “Boys, get out of this room. Hindi makakatulong sa sitwasyon niya ang pag-aaway niyo. So just go,” wika ng doktor.

Sabay na tumingin sa akin sina Ethan at Van and I gave them my bitchy, bored look. “Shoo!” I mouthed. Van glared at me bago lumabas ng pinto. Agad namang sumunod si Ethan na balak atang ipagpatuloy ang ginagawa nila kanina.

“And I thought it’s a bicycle accident,” wika ng doktor nang lumapit sya sa akin at sinimulang gamutin ang aking kamay.

“Well, it is. But Van needs to be punished for calling me stupid.” Tumawa sa sinabi ko ang doktor.

“That’s clever. Of course! No one is genius enough to call someone stupid. Specially, to say it to a young lady like you, you are worth all the respect. By the way, I’m Dr. Charlotte Mitton and I think I just met the famous Summer Leondale.” I looked at her questioningly. Paano naman ako naging famous Summer Leondale? Wala naman akong sinalihang school activities to make me popular. Malamang hindi magagandang bagay ang detalye nun.

“Yeah. I’m Summer. Posible ba na wala akong matanggap na bisita rito until lunch? I just wanna take a rest.” Ngumiti syang muli at saka tumango. She seemed friendly. Matapos niya akong bigyan ng pain reliever ay naramdaman ko na ang antok na bumabalot sa utak ko. I closed my eyes. Hell, yeah. I badly needed a rest. Ilang oras din ang inidlip ko nang maramdaman kong may umupo sa kamang kinaroroonan ko. Iminulat ko ang aking mga mata and… Crap! Ano ba ‘to?! Joke?!

“Summer!” Masyadong enthusiastic na wika ni Jin.

Yeah. Jin Cast. At meron siyang benda sa braso. “Gising ka na!” Lumipat siya sa kabilang kama sa loob ng clinic at naglabas ng isang libro mula sa isang bag.

“Akala ko ba hindi magpapapasok ng bisita until lunch?” Walang gana kong sabi. Ibinaba niya ang librong hawak.

“Well, alam ko yun. But I am actually a patient. Nung narinig ko ang usap-usapan na dumating ka na sakay pa ng kotse ni Van, naisip kong hanapin ka at nalaman kong narito ka sa clinic.” Usap-usapan? Tsk. Kaya pala kilala ako maski ni Dr. Mitton. Hindi ko alam na bida na rin ako sa rumor mill ng Montello High. “Kailangan ko pang tumalon ng second floor para makumbinsi si Dr. Mitton na kailangan kong ma-admit sa clinic,” sagot niya. What the hell did he just said he did?

“I think hindi clinic ang dapat na mag-admit sa’yo. Mas bagay ka sa mental,” wika ko.

“Hey, I just missed you so badly! And I’m freaking worried about you!” Alma niya na mas lalong ikinaiirita ko.

“Are you having a bloody crush on me?” Tanong ko. Tumawa naman siya at saka lumapit sa tabi ko.

“Why are you so straight to the point? Wala ka bang alam na mga sub-questions? At ikaw lang ang kilala kong babae na nakakapagtanong ng mga ganyang bagay nang walang alinlangan,” nakangiti niyang sabi. I gave him a bored smile.

“Isa lang ang ibig sabihin nun. I just don’t care.” If he’s not stupid, then he’ll get the point.

Medyo napawi naman ang ngiti sa mukha niya. His reaction is like that of a man who lost in a betting game. Hey, crap! Don’t tell me that he’s serious about crushing on me!

“Jin, huwag mong sabihing---”

“That’s just fine, Summer. Tsk. Ngayon ko lang na-realize na meron palang kayang mam-basted sa mukhang ito.” Saka siya nakangiting umiling. Nakahinga ako ng maluwag. At least hindi naman pala siya ganun kaseryoso. I know that I really have a bad attitude. Ayokong dagdagan iyong ng heart-breaking bitch title.

“Well, Jin. Sorry for that. I just think that you don’t deserve me. Cause I think that I’m such a talented, strong and amazing girl who deserves someone who is superior than you.”

He laughed. “I’ve always known that you have a high and perfect definition of yourself.”

I smiled at him. Just this once, nagustuhan ko sya as a person. Dahil hindi siya bitter about things. At dahil na rin siguro sa hindi nya kinokontra ang

hindi makataong tingin ko sa aking sarili.

“But either way, Summer, gusto kitang maging kaibigan. Can we be friends?” Tanong niya.

I gave him a scrutinizing look. “After the bloody welcome party? I don’t think so,” sagot ko.

“Hey, I never hurt you. And about that, ginawa ba ito ni Van sa’yo?” Turo niya sa nakabenda kong kamay. Hindi ako sumagot. Ugh. Kailangan kong iwasang sumagot ng mga tanong. “If he did that to you, hintayin niyang gumaling itong braso ko. Dudurugin ko ang dalawa niyang kamay.” Tsk. Nabura ng kayabangang ito ang magagandang bagay na nakita ko sa kanya.

“Talaga? Gusto ko nga sana na mabaldado sya, eh. Pero ang totoo nyan, hindi siya ang gumawa nito. I did this to myself,” wika ko.

“Ano? Likas talaga sa tao ang katangahan, no?” Komento niya na ikinataas ng kilay ko. Namimihasa na yata ang mga tao ngayon na husgahan ang thinking capability ko, ah. Hinawakan ko ang nakabenda niyang braso na ikinasigaw niya.

“F ck! What the hell!” He cursed.

“Call me again stupid at mananatili nang nakabenda ang braso mo habang buhay,” sabi ko at saka binitiwan ang kaniyang braso.

“Tsk. Hindi mo kailangang maging sadista,” wika niya.

“Hindi ka pa ba aalis dito sa clinic? Mas umiinit ang ulo ko tuwing nakikita kita, eh.” Kinuha niyang muli ang libro at umaktong nagbabasa. Is he playing a nerd guy now?

“Exams on Monday. Mas gusto kong manatili rito at magreview.”

“Hindi ko alam na grade conscious ka pala.”

“Well, maraming gustong lumugar sa Montello Power Ten. At hindi ko hahayaan na may umagaw ng pwesto ko. Isa pa, gusto kong palitan si

Freniere sa pwesto niya.” I’ve heard that thing from Mirden. The ranking of students. Iyon din ang dahilan kung bakit gusto niyang magreview kahapon. Na sana hinayaan ko na lang imbes na muntikan silang dalhin sa kapahamakan.

“Ano bang rank ni Van at gusto mong palitan?” Tanong ko.

“Nakuha niya ang unang pwesto. Ibig sabihin, siya ang pinakamagaling na estudyante ng Montello. Pero syempre, hindi iyon totoo. Maghintay lang sya at buburahin ko ang pangalan niya sa unang pwesto.” Hindi na lang ako sumagot. Baka maputulan ko ito ng braso kapag nagpatuloy pa sya, eh. Isa lang namang bagay ang sinang-ayunan ko sa kanya. Ang palitan si Van sa Rank One. Inagaw ko ang libro mula kay Jin. Kailangang simulan ko na ang pagrereview.

“Hey, alam kong pareho tayo ng evil plan pero mas malaki ang tyansa kong magtagumpay since nasa Power Ten na ako. Ikaw, ni hindi mo pa nga alam kung ano’ng pwesto mo, eh.”

“Manahimik ka o papaslangin kita at ang kayabangan sa iyong katawan.”

“Tsk. At naging killer librarian ka ngayon. Mga babae talaga.” Ugh. Meron pala talagang lalaking madaldal. Nakakairita. Nang lumingon ako kay Jin, nawala na ang pagka-playful ng aura niya at nakita ko ang pagiging seryoso niya. Ano’ng meron at mabilis ang pagpapalit ng mga mood ng mga tao?

“Summer, may ilang bagay akong gustong malaman kaya pinilit kong makasama ka rito.” Tiningnan ko lang siya. “Dinala ka ba ni Van sa mansiyon, sa mafia?”

Hindi ako sumagot. Nanatili akong tahimik. Kung gusto ko pang mabuhay, kailangan kong itikom ang bibig ko at manahimik.

“Summer, I want to know. I need to know,” wika niya.

I frowned at him. “Why do you want to know?” Mukha siyang nag-aalinlangan kung sasagutin ang tanong ko. Eh, bakit nga ba kailangan niyang malaman?

“Gusto ko lang makumpirma ang mga hinala ko. Kung may alam ang Freniere sa nangyari kay Novou. Dahil nung gabing nasa Nightwoods tayo, nung may sunog sa dorm… Si Andrew Novou ang sinusundan ko nun,” paglalahad niya na ikinabigla ko. Delikadong tubig na ang sinusubukang languyin nitong si Jin.

“What?” Gulat kong tanong.

“I saw Andrew Novou coming out of the burned room. Si Van talaga ang gusto kong makita noon. At hindi ko inaasahan na makikita ko si Novou. I mean, no one tries to go inside that room dahil tambayan yun ng leader ng Black Government. But that was why I went there, to catch him by surprise. And I thought I was the first person to attempt to do that. Pero hindi pala. Nagtaka naman ako kung bakit nandoon si Novou. He struck me as a nerd kid na hindi nanaising mapasok sa gulo ng gangs pero hayun siya sa lair ng isa sa mga leader. And then the fire started. Nakita ko si Andrew Novou na papunta sa direksyon ng Nightwoods which is really weird during that time. Kaya sinundan ko siya pero hindi ko sya nahabol. Instead, I saw those masked tuxedo people. And then you.” Tumigil siya at saka tumingin sa akin.

Kung ganun, yun talaga ang nangyari nung gabing iyon? It’s the punishment, he tried to kill one of the most important person in the Mafia. Totoo nga ang impormasyong nakalap ko nang hindi sinasadya kay Tres. Andrew Novou really planned to kill Van on that fire? Pero para magconclude si Jin base sa mga nakita lang nya, may talino rin pala sya kahit papaano.

“Teka, posible bang siya yung aninong nakita ko patungong Nightwoods?” Tanong ko.

“That’s possible. Or pwede ring ako yung nakita mo. Now, tell me, anong nangyari sa’yo? Sa inyo ni Van? May kinalaman ba yun sa pagkamatay ni Novou? I’m really curious about his death. Ilang gabi rin akong hindi nakatulog dahil dito.”

Kahit binigyan niya ako ng impormasyon na kumpirmasyon na rin ng sinabi nila Van at Tres, hindi ibig sabihin nun na magsasalita na ako tungkol sa

traumatic na experience ko sa mansyon. I don’t want to die yet. Isa pa, maaari ring ikasawi iyon ni Jin.

“Hindi ako dinala ni Van sa mansyon,” tanggi ko na lang. Naririnig ko ang boses ni Tres na pinagbabantaan akong huwag magsalita. Kahit napapalapit na si Jin sa totoong pangyayari, hindi na niya dapat malaman ito. At hindi rin ako dapat magsalita.

“I don’t believe you. Magkasama kayo ni Van. Isa lang ang ibig sabihin nun. At sigurado akong may alam ka tungkol dito. Nakikita kong ayaw mo lang magsalita.”

“Visit the mansion, then, if you want to know,” sagot ko. Fine. Mapapaslang rin siya sa suhestiyon ko. Tumawa siya ng mahina.

“I would if I can. Pero ang mga hindi inimbitahan sa lugar na iyon ay hindi makakapasok. Ano man ang gawin ko,” sagot niya. He had a point. Maraming bantay ilang kilometro pa lang ang layo sa mansion. And it’s really a creepy place. It felt like death is always hanging around.

“Give up, Jin. I’m not gonna say anything.”

“Pero—”

“I don’t want to die. Not now. Not this day. Not tomorrow. Not any other day!” Frustrated kong wika. Mukha namang naintindihan ako ni Jin dahil hindi na siya nagpumilit. Kinuha na lang niya ang isa pang libro mula sa kaniyang bag at saka nagbasa. Charming. Even a gangster could be that grade-conscious, too.

“Are you not afraid to die because of all this information you have?” Bigla kong natanong sa kaniya. Well, he wants to know deadly things that he shouldn’t know. Hindi ba siya natatakot sa pwedeng kalabasan ng curiousity niya? What do people say again? Curiosity killed the cat.

“I’m only afraid of the things that I don’t know. At isa pa, kahit ayaw mong magsalita, alam kong alam mo rin ang mga bagay na hindi mo rin dapat malaman. Delikado ka na, Summer. So I was just thinking kung gusto mo

ng karamay. And then we'll die together. Like Romeo and Juliet. Then our forlorn love will be known for the rest of the Montello history." Gusto ko na yatang madaliin ang katapusan ni Jin.

"Oh, I'm not fond of tragic endings. But you can still find your own Juliet and I could kill you both." He pouted his lips just like a child. Sasagot pa sana siya nang bumukas ang pinto at pumasok si Dr. Mitton.

"Hey, it's almost lunch. Gusto niyo bang magpahatid na lang ako ng pagkain dito?" Tanong niya. I started to get up. It's time to face the cruel world.

"Ok na po ako. I think it'll recover soon kaya lalabas na ako."

"Ako rin po!" Enthusiastic naman na sabi ni Jin. Pinigilan ko ang sarili kong sapakin siya.

Palabas na kami nang humabol sa amin si Dr. Mitton at iniabot sa akin ang isang maliit na black box na may pulang ribbon. Merong maliit na card na may imprentang SUMMER.

"Nakita ko yan kanina sa labas ng pinto. No one's allowed to go inside. Malamang nagwo-worry ang taong iyan kaya nag-iwan ng gift," wika niya.

Tumango ako. "Thanks." At saka lumabas ng clinic.

"Wow. And I thought I'm the only weird admirer," komento ni Jin.

I glared at him bago buksan ang box. It's only a note. A small note that makes me want to dig the deepest hole on the ground and hide forever. Sumilip din si Jin at naramdaman ko ang pagiging seryoso ng mood niya. Well, everything is turning into greater mess now. How the hell did I end up in this kind of situation? Cause this bloody note says,

"YOU KNOW TOO MUCH. YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE DEAD."

[13] Chapter 13: Damsel in Distress

Author's Note:

After blood and fire and f-ing busy days, it’s finally updated. Haha. And for those cool people who has got this awesome buckets of patience, super thanks! And thank you, too for the messages I got from wattpad and facebook wherein the only contents was like, ‘Hey! Update Now!’ Haha. Orayt, so you might want to hear these songs for this chapter:

Not Meant to Be – Theory of a Dead Man

Counting Crows – Untitled Love Song

Thanks! I’ll shut up now.

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 13: Damsel in Distress

Ako lang yata sa buong mundo ang nag-iisang seventeen year old girl who has got enough number of death threats to include me in a Guiness World Record list. I would be thankful if those threats were just pranks. But having the worst luck in the world means that those threats were as true as the Earth being round— or oblate spheroid as they teach us in Science class. And as I said, I was just a freaking teenager! Ano ba’ng kailangan nila sa akin? Para namang ginusto kong maranasan at malaman ang mga bagay na nalalaman ko. At ang isa pang nagpakumplikado ng lahat ay ang pagkaka-alam ni Jin sa pathetic kong sitwasyon.

Simula nang mabasa nya ang note kahapon ay idiniklara niya na ang sarili nya bilang body guard ko upang protektahan ako kung sakaling totoo man ang banta ng kung sinumang nagpadala ng note na yun. Kung kaya naman ramdam na ramdam ko ang awkwardness ng sitwasyon habang nagbi-breakfast kami on Sunday morning. Kahapon pang lunch nakiki-sit-in sa dining table namin nila Jamie, Mirden at Tyler (na bumalik na pala sa speaking terms sa amin matapos ang ilang araw nyang pag-iwas) si Jin. Malamang nga ay susundan ako nito pati sa dorm kung may magagawa lang syang paraan para makapasok sa dorm ng mga babae.

Kasalukuyang nakatingin sa amin sina Mirden at Jamie na sa tingin ko’y gustung-gustong magtanong. Tila mas alanganin naman ang sitwasyon ni

Tyler considering na binully sya ng Dark Monarch dati. Masaya namang kumakain si Jin na tila oblivious sa paligid.

“Are you guys dating? Since when? Parang ang bilis naman yata ng pangyayari?” Wika ni Jamie. Mukhang hindi na talaga niya napigilan ang sarili niyang magtanong.

“Sumasang-ayon ako na mabilis ang mga pangyayari, but we’re not dating,” sagot ko.

“Kung ganun, bakit parang at-home siya dito?” Tanong ni Mirden.

“We’re best friends,” nakangiting wika ni Jin na ikinanuot ng noo ni Tyler.

Sigh. With Jin’s wild imagination, pinaniwala na rin niya ang sarili niya na mag-best friends kami— just because hindi mutual ang feelings namin sa isa’t-isa.

“Summer, you can’t trust him,” seryosong wika ni Tyler at binigyan ng masamang tingin si Jin.

That was where Tyler was wrong because I don’t trust anyone, anyway. Well, I trusted a person last Friday night pero limited hours lang ang trust na iyon. And speaking of that devil, I haven’t seen him since dropping me off at the clinic yesterday.

“I don’t care if nobody thinks I am trustworthy. But Summer can always count on me.” And Jin smiled.

“Can’t you just stay away from us?” Maanghang na sagot ni Tyler. Woah. Tumatapang ang batang ito! Parang nung nakaraan lang ay natameme lang sya nang agawan sya ng kasayaw ni Jin.

Jin just shrugged. “Sorry, kid, but I won’t. Pwede ka nang magsumbong ngayon sa mga baby-sitters mo.”

“Jin, stop,” saway ko kay Jin. Ang dami-rami ko nang iniisip at ayokong pati ang pag-aaway nila ay intindihin ko rin. Uh! Simple lang ito kung tatantanan ako ni Jin pero ilang beses ko na syang tinaboy mula pa

kahapon. Masyado syang makulit at mapilit. Parang lalaking version nila Jamie at Mirden.

“Sorry, babes.” And Jin winked.

“Babes???” We all asked in horror. Paano ba umaandar ang utak ng isang Jin Cast?

“Hey, mas hindi tatanggapin ni Summer kung best friend ang itatawag ko sa kaniya. Babes is just fine. It’s shorter.” Oh, crap. Ito na ang pinakawalang kwentang eksplanasyon na narinig ko.

Sasagot pa sana ako nang mahagip ng mata ko si Detective Penber na may dalang tasa ng kape at papalapit sa amin. Uh-oh. Pati ba naman araw ng Linggo ay hindi ako tatantanan ng mga… unwelcome na tao? Workaholic ba ang imbestigador na ito at pati Sunday ay nangingisda ng impormasyon?

“Good morning, pretty ladies. At sa inyo rin…” Tukoy niya kina Jin at Tyler.

Starstruck! That’s Mirden’s reaction. Ano’ng problema nitong isang ito?

“Detective Patrick Penber?” Tanong ni Mirden.

Ngumiti naman si Detective Penber. “Yes. And you are?”

“Mirden Montgomery, Sir. I’ve read your books, Sir. At nagbabasa rin ako ng articles tungkol sa inyo. Mukhang madami kayong achievements and awards! I also heard that you’ll be investigating the case of Andrew Novou’s death. At hindi ko po ini-expect na makikita ko agad kayo sa personal. Humahanga po ako sa ability ninyo.” The girl is babbling. And this is the first time I’ve seen her like this. I wonder why. She’s always logical and focused. But now, nakita ko ang other side niya: the nonsensical Mirden. Ano ba’ng kalokohan ito?

Ngumiti si Detective Penber at saka nagpasalamat sa hindi inaasahang fan. Jamie also eyed Mirden with a wondering look. Pwede ko na ngang mabasa

ang katagang ‘what the hell?’ sa noo ni Jamie. Mukhang nagulat din sya sa behavior ni Mirden.

“Hey, girls. Huwag niyong sabihing labag sa batas ng kalikasan ang magkaroon ng crush si Mirden? You got that look on your faces.” Jin pinched my nose! Anak ng penguin naman, o! Masyadong pamilyar umasta ang taong ito! Tiningnan ko sya ng masama bilang babala. Mirden became uncomfortable with Jin’s remark.

“T-teka lang. H-hindi ko sinabing crush ko sya.” And she blushed. Well, that’s the ironic stuff. Ano namang nagustuhan niya kay Detective Penber?

“Well, kiddos, mind if I join you for breakfast?” Tanong ng detective na nakatingin sa akin. Mukhang hindi na niya pinansin yung crush remark. Tumango ang mga kasama ko— to my horror, pero ano namang inaasahan ko? Hindi naman nila alam kung ano’ng pangtotorture sa isip ang dinanas ko sa interrogation nitong detective na ito. I glanced away as he sat across me.

“So, detective, ano na ang status ng investigation niyo?” Tanong ni Mirden.

“We’re still in the dark. I just needed to know a few things from some willing people.” Tumingin siya sa direksiyon ko. “But surely, isa lang ang magiging resulta ng kasong ito: katotohanan at hustisya.” He’s doing it again! Hindi niya inalis ang paningin sa akin. And I felt conscious about it… messing up my mind.

“Talaga? I’m really curious about it. And I believe na magaling kang detective para ma-solve ang kaso, without harming innocent people with the process of interrogation,” pabirong wika ni Jin kasabay ang palihim na pagpisil ng kamay ko sa ilalim ng mesa. Mukhang napansin niya ang tensyon sa pagitan namin ni Detective Penber. Napatingin ako sa kanya pero diretso lang ang tingin niya sa detective na napataas ang kilay sa isang aroganteng paraan. I don’t really trust anyone but it seems like Jin was saying the truth when he claimed I can always count on him, kahit na nga di ko naman sino-solicit ang tulong niya.

“Harming innocent people with my interrogation?” Tanong ng Detective.

“Yes. I’ve seen it in movies. Hindi ka ba nanunood ng Detective movies?” Umiling ang detective bilang sagot kay Jin. “Too bad. Eh, di sana, nagkaroon ka pa ng idea about Detective fashion. That black coat is cool. But I suggest that you wear leather combat shoes or boots instead of black leather shoes. Tapos yung black hat and dark colored scarf. And eye-glasses with multiple lens, too! And you should have a compass and old yellow newspapers. Yes! That would be really cool!” With conviction na wika ni Jin. He’s really so impossible pero nagtagumpay siyang idistract si Detective Penber.

Mukha namang hindi makapaniwala ang Detective sa suhestiyon ni Jin. And I swear, I could almost see a shadow of a smile. Na-trigger naman ang childhood part ni Tyler at nagtanong.

“Are we talking about Sherlock Holmes?”

Umiling si Jin. “No. We’re talking about the famous Detective Penber.”

Jamie and Tyler snickered silently while Mirden blushed even more. Mukhang hindi kumportable ang detective na pag-usapan ang fashion taste niya.

“Sorry, but you’re name is?” Tanong ng Detective kay Jin.

“Jin Cast.”

“Jin Cast. At kaanu-ano mo si Summer?”

“I am her best friend.” Umakbay naman siya ngayon sa akin. Siniko ko siya sa tagiliran. “Ouch. Bayolente.” Jin sported a look of mock hurt pero hindi inalis ang braso sa balikat ko. Inirapan ko sya. Tumingin naman si Detective Penber sa amin na tila na-a-amuse.

To add to the weirdness of the situation, the devil and Makki entered the cafeteria and now on their way to our direction. Wow! Ano to? Lunch party? At dumarami ang bisita kong un-invited! Lumiwanag naman ang mukha ni Tyler nang makita si Van.

“Kuya Van!” Masayang bati ni Tyler nang makalapit sila.Tumango sa kaniya si Van at saka tumingin sa akin.

“What?” I asked with a glare. Hindi niya ako sinagot at saka itinuon ang atensyon kay Detective Penber. Ngumiti naman sa akin si Makki nang makita ako. Agad ding iyong nawala nang makita niyang katabi ko si Jin. Muling napatingin sa akin si Van.

“Hindi mo kailangang tumambay sa mesang ito kung gusto mo akong kausapin,” wika ni Van. I was confused. Ano’ng pinagsasasabi nito? Wala akong balak kausapin siya. Na-realize ko lang na hindi para sa akin ang mga salitang iyon nang sumagot si Detective Penber.

“Just a cup of coffee. I know things will never be easy. Right, Summer?” Penber asked. Tsk. What the hell is wrong with this people? Hindi ko na nasusundan ang mga pinagsasabi nila.

“I think you all should go,” sagot ko.

“Kailangan kitang makausap, Summer Leondale.” Ikinataas ng kilay ko ang pagtawag sa akin ni Van sa buo kong pangalan. Walang stupid girl o annoying bitch na remarks. Since when did it all become formal? I was about to say a witty comeback nang unahan ako ni Jin na matamang nakatingin kay Van. At least naisipan niyang tanggalin ang braso niya sa balikat ko.

“I deeply apologize but Summer won’t talk to you,” wika ni Jin. I should note the sarcasm on the word apologize.

“She will talk to me,” may diin na wika ni Van. Mararamdaman ang pagbabanta sa boses nya.

Nagsukatan ng tingin ang dalawa. “Stay away from her. She won’t talk to you. I won’t let her even if I become another Andrew Novou case.”

Nagtagis ang bagang ni Van. Iniuugnay sa kaniya ang kaso ni Novou. That’s a sensitive thing lalo pa at sinabi iyon ni Jin sa harap ni Detective Penber na

mukhang na-a-amuse sa pangyayari. Hindi na sumagot si Van na tila mas naging deadly pa ang aura.

“Careful, Cast. Hindi mo alam pero baka willing makipagpalit sa iyo si Andrew Novou,” wika ni Makki.

“Okay, enough, kiddos. Sa tingin ko ay kailangan na nating magkwentuhan, Van,” awat ni Detective Penber sa nagbabadyang kaguluhan. Tumayo ang detective at nauna nang maglakad palayo.

“Sinusubukan mo ba talaga ako, Jin?” Mahina subalit halatang galit na tanong ni Van. Alam kong gulo na talaga ang patutunguhan ng eksenang ito. Even Mirden, Jamie and Tyler were now stiff because of the tension. Tumayo si Jin paharap kay Van. Crap! I stood up, too and placed myself between them.

“Hey, morons! Stop it! Don’t ruin our breakfast!” Wika ko. Mukha namang nakinig sa akin si Jin dahil bumalik rin siya sa pagkakaupo matapos akong tingnan ng ilang sandali. I turned to Van who’s looking intently at me. “I think you need to go.”

“I will talk to you. I will find you,” wika niya at saka umalis. Nagpaalam na rin si Makki at sumabay kay Van.

Huh, jerk. As if hahayaan ko syang mahanap ako. Sa pagkakaalam ko ay wala naman kaming dapat na pag-usapan. At isa pa, ayoko ring makasama siya ng matagal. Lagi akong napapasok sa mas malaking gulo kapag kasama ko siya. Nang matahimik ang mesa namin ay nagpatuloy kami sa pagkain. Ilang sandali rin kaming walang imikan at nagpakiramdaman. At tulad ng dati, si Jamie ulit ang nagkalakas ng loob para basagin ang katahimikan.

“Hey, Mirden. What was that about? Are you crushing on that detective?” Tanong ni Jamie. We all looked at Mirden who was now red on her face.

“I— I like detective stories! And it’s— it’s just a good thing na nakaharap ko ang isang tunay na detective,” sagot ni Mirden.

“Well, he’s hot. There’s nothing wrong if you are into him.”

“I’m not!” Depensa ni Mirden which made it worse. Habang mas nagiging defensive sya, mas nahahalatang gusto niya ang Detective.

Hanggang sa matapos na namin ang agahan ay tampulan pa rin ng tukso si Mirden. Maski sina Tyler at Jin ay nakisali. Humiwalay ako sa kanila matapos kumain para pumunta sa clinic at ipatingin muli ang injured kong kamay. Which made Jin do the same dahil sa injured nya ring braso na resulta ng kaniyang crazy stunt kahapon.

“Saan na ang punta mo niyan?” Tanong ni Jin habang naglalakad kami palabas ng main building. Dr. Mitton told us that we are both recovering fast. Mukha nga lang mas malala ang injury ni Jin.

“Dorm,” tipid kong sagot.

“Summer, try to stay away from Van. We all know he is trouble.” Napahinto siya sandali at tila may ikinonsidera. “Well… I am trouble, too, what with the Dark Monarch. But, Van is a different case. Just… I need you to stay safe.” Hindi ako sumagot. Alam kong nasa isip ni Jin ang death note na natanggap ko kahapon. Of course, I know that Van is trouble. At sa naganap kahapon, mas lalo akong naging desidido na huwag makalapit si Van sa akin. Tsk. Pinakamataas na level na ang pagiging screwed up ko.

Inihatid ako ni Jin hanggang sa pinto ng Girl’s dorm. Pinangangatawanan talaga niya ang role niya. He is really weird. Hindi ko makuha ang point ng pagiging over-protective niya sa akin. Hindi ko kailangan ng tulong ng kahit sino. I live by that principle. Pero kahit papaano— sa sitwasyon ko ngayong masasabing nasa bingit ng kamatayan— aaminin kong comforting na may kahit iisang taong nakakaalam. Pero maski pa, hindi ibig sabihin nun ay nagtitiwala na ako kay Jin o kahit kanino.

This school is really strange. Everything is weird, really. And Van is really mysterious— scary mysterious. I should have known better than to mess with him. Sana naging oblivious na lang ako sa kaangasan niya.

I was about to climb the stairs nang may humila sa kamay ko— sa injured kong kamay— pabalik. Iritable akong lumingon sa taong hindi alam kung ano ang purpose ng benda. And I can't help but roll my eyes nang mapagsino ko iyon. Akala ko, dahil kumplikado at weird na ang sitwasyon ko, magiging exempted na ako sa high school drama. I was wrong, obviously.

"Ano ba'ng kailangan mo kay Van?" Galit na bungad ni Trinity.

"Ano'ng kailangan mo sa akin?" Kalmado kong balik-tanong. Tiningnan ko siya ng diretso at walang emosyon.

"Wag mong ibalik sa akin ang tanong! We both know na ikaw ang dahilan kung bakit kausap ni Van ang detective na yun! God, you even ditched class para lang puntahan si Van at ibalik dito! For what? Ha, Summer? Why can't you just stop being a slut?!"

Isinigaw ni Trinity ang huling word na slut at napukaw nun ang atensiyon ng mga estudyante na nasa lobby ng dorm. They were now forming a circle around us, like they were expecting something. Nakita ko rin sa mga nakamasid sina Cattleya, Trixie at iba pang barbie bitches. They were mouthing 'bitch' to my direction. But unfortunately for them, I don't have time for an entertainment show. Sinimulan kong talikuran si Trinity at akmang hahakbang sa hagdan subalit hinila niya ulit ako sa pesteng injured kong kamay.

Iwinasiwas ko ang kamay ko as an initial reaction kapag nasasaktan. At nadala rin si Trinity sa ginawa kong aksyon na muntik na niyang ika-off balance. Tiningnan ko siya habang nakakapit siya sa isa sa mga nanunuod. "Gusto kong matulog," walang emosyon ko pa ring sabi at saka muli sanang aakyat subalit humabol ulit si Trinity at hinila ako pabalik.

"Bastos ka ring kausap, ah!" Sigaw niya. Uh. Have I mentioned na gusto kong tahimik lang ang Sundays ko? Brr! Humarap ako nang diretso kay Trinity.

"Ano bang gusto mong sabihin? Siguraduhin mong may kwenta yan, ah," wika ko.

“Bakit mo sinisiraan si Van sa mga otoridad? Bakit kinakalat mo na may kinalaman siya sa pagkamatay ni Andrew Novou?! You accusing bitch! Look at yourself! You think you could judge him like that?!” Galit na galit si Trinity na hindi ko naman maintindihan kung bakit. Kung hindi lang ako naiirita, baka napahalakhak ako ng malakas. Baliw na ang isang ito.Napakasenseless ng point niya.

“I never implicated him in Novou’s death. Para sa isang perfect leader, napaka-flawed ng impormasyon mo,” tangi kong sagot. I hope she’s done dahil gusto ko nang umakyat sa kwarto ko at magpahinga. Tumalikod na ako. Subalit hahakbang pa lang ako ay pinigil na nya ulit ako. This time, she pulled at my hair as she screamed.

“Bitch! Liar!”

And that’s how everything turned to hell. I won’t let myself be humiliated like that. I let her pull my hair while I’m waiting for a chance. At nang makakita ako ng opening sa mukha niya, lumapat ng malakas ang aking kamao. We both cried in pain. Tsk! Nakalimutan kong injured nga pala ako! But it paid when I saw her bleeding nose. Pero hindi siya sumuko. And worse, I thought it was just a one-on-one between us. Hindi ko alam kung kailan nagsimulang nakigulo sina Cattleya at ang mga alipores niya. D mn. Dehado ako. Kung hindi lang injured ang kamao ko at kung magaling na sana ang mga pasa ko, di sana kahit sampu pa ay may tyansa akong mapatumba sila. Ang nakakatawa nito, nagkakampihan sina Trinity at ang mga malalanding pilit niyang pinipigilan na akitin si Van.

Someone grabbed my injured hand. “Sh t!” I cried and I kicked that someone in the gut. It continued. I fought more on punching and kicking habang pinupuntirya nila ang injury ko. Ha! Stupid cowards! Alam nilang doon lang sila mananalo. Nararamdaman at naririnig ko ang ingay sa paligid. Kahit ang sakit. Which is good and also bad. Good because it means I’m far from unconsciousness which means I could still fight and kick some ass. However, while I’m still here, the pain is getting more unbearable.

And then someone punched my injured hand, hard. Sa anim na witches na ito, hindi ko na alam kung sino ang naka-jackpot. Napaluhod ako, clutching

my hand and bringing it to my chest. Sinimulan nila akong sipain. D mn! I feel like I'm a wounded tiger and they are the stupid, coward… giant rats and roaches. See, this pain is making me incoherent. Well, I hate rats and roaches as much as I hate these bitches.

Should I say, 'I freaking give up!' or 'Stop!'? But of course not. My pride would never allow me to do that. I'd rather suffer until I'm dead kesa magmakaawa sa mga ito. At saka naman natahimik ang mga nanonood na tila may pumasok na anghel habang patuloy sa pagsipa sa akin ang mga peste. What now?! I should have known that it would be another cliche. In this kind of situation, I might be expecting that a cute guy in a cape will save me. And I dreadfully hope not.

And hope granted! It's not a guy. It's actually an angel. Na halos makapagpahimatay sa akin nang makita ko ang hawak niya. Trinity, Cattleya and the others stopped at takot na takot na nakatingin sa bagong dating. And why not? The angel was pointing a shiny black .39 on their heads and was maniacally smiling. I saw Mirden and Jamie rush to my side at tinulungan akong tumayo. Mukhang sabay silang dumating nitong taong ito.

"Wow. Kakalabas ko lang sa kulungan pero mukhang babalik na naman ako… Pero sige na nga. Simulan na natin. Sinong gustong mauna?" Tumingin sila sa may hawak ng baril na nakangiti pa rin subalit tila seryoso sa binitiwang salita. Tumigil ang dulo ng baril sa direksiyon ni Cattleya. "Any death wish?" Tanong nito at nagsipagtakbuhan ang mga witch palabas. Kahit ang ilang mga estudyante ay nagsipasok sa kani-kanilang kwarto. Konti lang ang nagpatuloy sa kanilang gawain sa lobby. Sa tindi ng gulo rito ay nakapagtatakang wala pang mga nakatataas na nakatunog. Pero Sunday ngayon, malamang day-off din sila.

Lumapit sa akin ang may hawak ng baril at niyakap ako. Oh, crap! This can't be! Why should this be my luckiest day?!

"Oh my God! Baby sis! Are you okay?" Tanong niya and I eyed her and her gun.

“What the hell! Ahhh! Crap!” Kill me now! Since when did I lose all the cool points! Maybe the world is gonna end and it’s due to the Zombie Apocalypse! And maybe, I needed a gun, too! Because as she released me from the hug, I confirmed what was already in front of me as reality and not an apparition. And yes, she has a freaking gun! I looked at her and gaped. Ugh! This is real. My perfect and angelic big sister is here.

Why the hell are you here, Autumn Leondale?!

[14] Chapter 14: Blood as Red as Fire

Author’s Note:

Just on time! How was your Friday the 13th? Made some kills? Haha. Anyway, it’s 14th already so here’s the 14th Chapter. It’s a calm point, by the way. And yeah, it’s this awesome girl’s birthday!

Happy Birthday, Jek! (Just thought to update first before our weekened slumber party!)

And hey, gangsta sweeties, you might want to listen to these for this chapter. These songs set the mood for this one:

Scars – Allison Iraheta

Pretty/Unpretty – Glee

Vindicated – Dashboard Confessional

It’s an early treat! Enjoy!

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 14: Blood as Red as Fire

“What?” She asked innocently. Isn’t it obvious why I feel dumbfounded?! I know nakanganga ako sa kaniya. That’s not a pretty sight but how else was I supposed to react to this?

“You’re holding a gun!” I told her. Sino ba namang hindi magugulat? At ano nga iyong sinabi niya pagdating niya? Kagagaling sa kulungan?! What a bogus! Autumn is always the sweet, gorgeous and perfect girl, blazing red hair and all. And really, I would always have a hard time whenever we are compared to each other. Palagi niyang nakukuha lahat ng counting sticks kapag tungkol sa mga magagandang bagay ang pinag-uusapan. Plus, she’s Daddy’s favorite.

I remember that I have always wanted to go to Arturia University. It is a prestigious school for girls. Pero kahit anong gawin ko ay hindi pa rin ako ipinasok ni Daddy doon. I was still wondering kung bakit si Autumn lang ang nasa Arturia. Hindi ba ako pasok sa qualifications na hanap ng school? O hindi ako pasok sa pamantayan ng sarili kong ama? Well, the latter part was a hard truth. My father is an arrogant perfectionist. And I honestly can’t understand how Mom puts up with him. Real love. My mom is kind of a matured version of Autumn. Why can’t I just be another version of her, too?

“Oh, this? It’s a pellet gun,” sagot ni Autumn na kinalabit ang gatilyo ng baril. Tumilapon sa malayong parte ng dorm ang isang maliit na pellet. Nakahinga ako ng maluwag. Kung totoong baril iyon, iisipin kong nababaliw na ang kapatid ko, pati ako.

“At bakit meron ka nang walang kwentang bagay na yan?” Tanong ko. Kasalukuyan na kaming naglalakad tungo sa kwarto. Mirden and Jamie were already waiting for us at the door.

“While I’m on my way here, nakakita ako ng dalawang bata. Binabaril nung isa yung kaawa-awang isa pang bata gamit ito. So bumaba ako ng kotse at kinuha yung pellet gun. What that kid did was violent, you know,” paliwanag niya.

What I hated about her, maliban sa pagkakaroon niya ng kotse— not a luxury car but it was still a red four wheels— ay ang pagiging sobrang buti niya. Meron na nga yata siyang sure slot sa heaven dahil sa kabutihan niya. She’s beautiful, kind, bouncy and a positive girl. She is at the top of her class in Arturia University at magaling din siya sa Arts. She is really perfect at mahirap ang maikumpara sa ganitong klase ng tao. Palagi kang talo. I know because I’ve experienced losing to her myself. And crap, it freaking

hurts. Lalo na at alam mong ni hindi naman siya nakikipagkumpetisyon. The hardest part was that she is so good to me. She never treated me any less but her sister. That's why most of the time, I wanted to be away from her. And speaking of which, anong ginagawa niya rito?

"Why are you here, Autumn?" Tanong ko habang sinusubukan niya akong alalayan.

"To save you, baby sister! You are my damsel in distress!" I rolled my eyes. For a twenty-one year old girl, may mga behavior talaga siyang childish.

"I'm fine. You can leave," seryoso kong sagot. She pouted her lips, and I know the real reason is coming out next. This is how I get real answers from her.

"Tumawag ang Montello High. Na-injure ka raw. Daddy can't go. Mom can't, too. So I went instead. Hindi ko alam na ma-wi-witness ko pa pala first hand ang dahilan ng injury mo. God! Why are they like this to you? How could they bully you like that?! Hindi ako makapaniwala sa school na ito. I would demand that Daddy transfer you to somewhere else!" She called it bullying while I took it as normal teenage stuff. But it's because my big sister doesn't get into trouble. What is normal for me is extreme for her.

"Just wait until I recover from my injuries. There's a thing called payback," wika ko. Pumalatak si Autumn. Revenge is not really her thing. Angel nga, eh. Ikinagulat ko na tumawag pala ang school sa family ko. Sa sobrang weird ng school na ito, minsan nakakalimutan kong school nga pala ito. Tumulong na si Jamie sa pag-alalay sa akin papasok sa kwarto. "By the way, have you met my roommates?" Tanong ko.

"Yes, I met your friends. Sinamahan nila ako dito sa dorm. Thank you, by the way." Tumango sina Mirden at Jamie.

"Summer, hindi mo sinabing may kapatid ka pala," wika ni Jamie.

"At grabe, ate, nag-mo-model ka ba?" Tanong ni Mirden.

Nakangiting umiling si Autumn. “I’m not. But I could handle photography and painting. And I could use some models.” See? Fans. She could easily make people love her by simply existing.

“Pwede kang maging action heroine nung hawak mo yung gun kanina. You reminded me of Tifa of Final Fantsay VII,” ani Mirden.

“Black Widow of Avengers,” wika naman ni Jamie.

“Ah, it’s a pellet gun, actually,” wika ni Autumn. “Pero nakakatawa talaga ang hitsura nang mga yun nang makita nila yung hawak ko.” Tumawa siya ng mahina.

Napailing na lang ako at pabagsak na humiga sa kama. Pinakiramdaman ko ang sarili ko. Sh t! Para akong construction worker na gumawa ng panglimang araw na trabaho sa loob lang ng 24 oras. Malamang may bagong sugat na naman ako.

“Summer, you got a scratch on your left cheek,” puna ni Autumn. So that explains the stinging. Lumapit siya sa akin at tiningnan ako sa mukha. “Don’t worry about it, gagamutin ko yan mamaya. Pero sis, bakit ang ganda mo pa rin kahit may sugat ka sa mukha?” Oh, hell. Here she goes again. She always claims na maganda ako, and that I’m so unique. Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng purpose niya on doing that, even though it’s very obvious to the world na hindi niya ako kasingganda.

“Autumn, when are you gonna stop saying that? Nakakairita sa pandinig,” sagot ko.

She frowned. “I’m just saying the truth. I know you pretty well,” sagot niya at naghanap ng first aid kit sa drawer ko. Agad niyang sinimulan ang paggamot sa sugat ko.

“You are both beautiful,” wika ni Mirden.

“See? I told you.” Hindi ko alam kung paanong naubos ang pasensya ko or dahil na rin sa sakit na nararamdaman ko kung kaya madali akong napikon sa sitwasyon.

“Autumn, stop it. Kung ginagawa mo ito dahil gusto mong maikumpara na naman tayo, then please, don’t. Go home. Kaya kong gamutin ang sarili ko,” iritable kong wika. Itinigil ni Autumn ang paggamot sa pisngi ko at mataman akong tinitigan.

“Iniisip mong gusto kong kinukumpara tayo? God, Summer! All this time, yan ang iniisip mo sa tuwing sinasabi kong maganda ka? You actually don’t really appreciate me as your sister at all? Is that right?” Puno ng hinanakit ang boses ni Autumn.

“Hindi mahalaga kung ano ang iniisip ko kundi kung ano ang nagiging resulta tuwing ginagawa mo ang mga bagay na yan,” sagot ko. She looked really hurt now. Medyo weird tingnan ang mukha niya nang hindi nakikita ang normal niyang mga ngiti.

“Summer, alam mong hindi iyon ang intensiyon ko! Don’t you think that having a mindset like that is really immature?” Malumanay niyang sabi.

I scoffed. “Of course, I am the immature one. At sa pagitan nating dalawa, siyempre ako ang mali! Kelan ba naman gumawa ng mga maling bagay ang isang Autumn Leondale?!” Alam kong I was already crossing the line here pero wala na akong pakialam. Because that is exactly how I feel. Palagi ko na lang nararamdaman ang pesteng inferiority complex kapag nariyan si Autumn.

Sasagot pa sana siya subalit bumukas ang pintuan at pumasok si Ethan at ang ilang school guards. Napalitan ng gulat at pagtataka ang bothered na ekspresyon ng mga kasama ko sa kwarto.

“May nagsumbong na merong dalang baril ang bisita niyo,” bungad ni Ethan. Agad na tumayo si Autumn at iniabot ang pellet gun.

“It was a mistake. It was only a toy gun. Na-shocked lang ako nang makita kong sinasaktan nila ang kapatid ko. That’s my instinct. To protect her. Because she is my sister,” paliwanag niya at saka malungkot na tumingin sa direksiyon ko. I felt a pang of guilt but I pushed it away. I know what she meant though. It was an instinct to protect your sister. I… I used to protect her and she knew that I was willing to give my life protecting her.

“Naiintindihan ko, Miss Leondale. Kahit ako, I will do something in that kind of situation. But this fake gun started a commotion. So the principal wants to see you, too. Maaari ka bang sumama?”

Tumango si Autumn at tumingin sa akin. “I’ll be back. I’ll sleep here tonight.” And she went out of the room.

“Summer, are you okay?” Tanong ni Ethan bago lumabas ng pinto. Tumango ako at tumingin sa ibang direksiyon. I don’t really want to talk about anything right now. Hell, I used to not talk about anything to anyone at all. Pero masyadong maraming taong nagpupumilit sumawsaw sa mundo ko sa lugar na ito.

“Summer, if there’s any problem—anything at all— just tell me,” sinabing muli ni Ethan na akala ko’y nakalabas na ng kwarto.

I didn’t respond. I especially didn’t look back. Ayokong makita niya sa ekspresyon ng mukha ko na kasalukuyan akong nakikipagpatintero sa mga nakamamatay na problema. Hindi ko namalayan ang pag-alis ni Ethan. Narinig ko na lang ang pagsara ng pinto. Ilang sandali ring tahimik.

“Yung attitude mo kanina sa ate mo, it’s not cool.” Boses ni Jamie.

Now, what?! See, nakahanap agad ng kakampi ang perfect kong kapatid.

“Shut up! Cause I really don’t care!”

“We were just telling you kung ano ang tama at mali dahil mukhang masyado ka nang nagiging confident sa ginagawa mo. Treating your older sister like that is so vain!” Wika ni Mirden. I looked at them fiercely, anger rising in my chest. Now they have opinions! Marahas akong tumayo at humakbang palapit sa kanila. Mirden flinched. Mukhang inaasahan na niya ang bayolente kong reaksyon.

“You don’t know anything! So just shut up, Nerd!” Pasigaw kong sabi. Napipikon na ako sa lahat ng bagay. Napipikon ako sa buong mundo na parang kinakalaban ako. I just want some quiet but instead, I was here with

a lot on my plate. I never thought I would say this but, I am just too stressed!

“Summer! You don’t have to treat everyone around you like that!” Wika ni Jamie.

I glared at her. “Like what? Like useless pieces of nonsensical cowards?! Well, that’s the truth!” Mukhang tinamaan sila sa sinabi ko. I really did crossed the line. And I can’t help it. Alam kong hindi lahat ng bagay na ginagawa ko ay tama. Meron lang mga panahon na hindi ko mapigilang maging masama. I am a normal girl, with flaws and all, and we all have our shares of mistakes. It happens. Except for the perfect Autumn, mapait kong naisip.

“Tinawag mo kaming useless and cowards?” Buong pait na tanong ni Mirden. Hindi ako sumagot. Nasundan iyon ng katahimikan at buntong-hininga bago nagsalita si Jamie.

“Maybe you have a point. That we’re cowards and useless. Pero hindi porke’t iniligtas mo kami mula sa mga street gangsters noong Friday ay pwede mo nang sabihin ang mga yun sa mukha namin! For someone who cares so much about being imperfect compared to her sister, hindi ako makapaniwalang ikaw pa ang magsasalita ng ganito. But what did I expect? Pasensiya ka na kung hindi kami ipinanganak na kasinglakas at kasinggaling mo!” Wika ni Jamie at saka hinila si Mirden papunta sa pinto. Subalit bago sila lumabas ay may pahabol siyang sinabi.

“We still think you are a friend though you made it clear that you don’t think of us that way. Pero wala ka pa ring choice dahil yun ang gusto naming iturin sa iyo. It’s just that today, hindi ako natutuwa sa inasta mo. You know your way to lunch alone, right?” At saka sila lumabas ng kwarto.

Nadagdagan ang inis ko. Crap! I was about to hit them with my fist kanina, pero hindi ko magawa. Dahil ba sa alam kong wala silang laban? Or… dahil nagiging special na rin sila sa akin? What the hell! I really don’t need friends. This was like with Autumn. Kahit galit na galit ako sa kaniya, I just can’t kill her. Instead, I became protective of her, which is what always

happen nung elementary pa kami. Except, ako lagi ang nauuwing bitch sister habang si Autumn ang modest one.

And Jamie and Mirden have no idea about how I'm feeling. Maski ako, hindi ko na rin alam kung ano ang mararamdaman ko. I have a freaking death threat from I-don't-know-who, I almost died twice because of Van Freniere— speaking of which is that strange, tingling sensation I began to have around him ever since Friday night. Add to that is my growing inferiority complex dahil sa pagdating ni Autumn. Never to mention that I'm injured at pinagtulungan ng mga bitches kanina. Gawd. I'm so stressed — mentally, emotionally, and physically. I'm so tired! Isang pitik na lang and I might go crazy.

I sat down on my bed and leaned my head against the headrest. I hugged all my pillows. At dahil mukhang may kaagaw ako sa mga ito mamaya, kailangan kong samantalahin ang moment na ito. Gusto ko nang magpahinga. But since I am an unlucky person, kailangan ko na ring harapin ang mga bagay na unti-unti ko nang nare-realize. I can't shake the feeling that I'm in deep trouble.

I think… I think… someone is keeping an eye on me inside this school. Someone is waiting for me to say something carelessly then shoot me dead without second doubt. At sino ang posibleng gagawa nun? It could be Sebastian Freniere. Halata naman kay Tres na gustung-gusto niya akong gilitan ng leeg, as soon as possible nga siguro kung siya ang masusunod. Or it could be from the other side… someone from that group where Novou came from, his boss according to Tres— the very ones who killed him. Posible kayang alam nilang may nalalaman ako?

And then there's also Van Freniere. Alam kong dapat ko na siyang iwasan. At kahit pinalampas niya ang pagkakataong hayaan akong mamatay nung mga nakaraang gabi, maaaring sa ibang araw, oras at panahon niya iyon gawin sa akin. But why is my instinct telling me that I still have to trust him with this? Stay with me and you'll be safe. Huh! No, I'm not asking for his help. At kahit sabihin na nating na-aappreciate ko ang inaalok na tulong nila Jin at Ethan, I couldn't possibly attempt to. Baka malagay din sila sa panganib. I also can't go to Detective Penber— or anyone else for that matter. Baka kabubuka pa lamang ng labi ko ay may bumaril na sa akin—

or sa kanila. Isa pang bagay na lubos na kinakatakot ko ay ang pagdating ni Autumn! She's freaking here! May posibilidad na kilala na siya ng no-faced kong kalaban at pwedeng madamay siya. Hindi ako papayag na masabit siya sa kamiserablehan ko. She needed to go away! D ng!

Hindi ko pansin kung gaano ako katagal sa ganoong posisyon. Nakita kong oras na ng lunch pero wala akong ganang tumayo. I closed my eyes. Someone opened the door of my room but I kept my eyes closed. Ayoko munang harapin ang kahit sino kina Autumn, Jamie o Mirden. Wala pa ako sa point of acceptance.

"I found you."

My head immediately snapped to the direction of the voice at gulat na tumingin sa nagsalita. What is he doing here? This is a freaking Girl's Dormitory!

"Freniere?" Tangi kong nasabi.

"You can't escape me by skipping lunch," wika ni Van. He is so unbelievable! At ang galing talaga ng timing niya na manira ng mga moments.

"You are restricted from here, Van Freniere. Girl's Dormitory ito."

"Who told you I care about restrictions?" Uh. Of course, the leader of the Black Government is beyond the school rules.

Sinukat ko siya ng tingin. "Wala ako sa mood makipag-usap." At muli kong ipinikit ang mata ko. Sana nakuha na niya ang point. Ilang sandali ring natahimik.

"I heard about the group cowardice." Okay, hanga na talaga ako sa pagiging updated ng lahat sa mga pangyayari sa Montello.

"Oh, so you've heard about your lovesick, lunatic ex-girlfriend's adventure? Please don't tell me you're here to praise her in front of me," sarkastiko kong sagot.

He walked towards me at wala na akong nagawa nang umupo siya sa kama ko. Inisip kong sipain siya palayo pero mukhang sasayangin ko lang ang lakas ko. I'm an injured person! Hintayin lang ng lahat ang pagrecover ko!

"Ano'ng nalalaman ni Jin Cast?" Tanong niya. From his crazy, lovestruck ex-girlfriend to this role-playing bestfriend of mine. Parang circus ang usapang ito.

"Ha?" Maang ko lang na sagot. Ano namang sasabihin ko sa kaniya tungkol sa nalalaman ni Jin? I'm in trouble because of what I know. Di na kailangang madamay si Jin.

"He's always around you. He's acting as if he knew something. At alam mong hindi iyon pwedeng mangyari, Summer."

"He doesn't know anything."

"Stay away from that clown before he finds out things he shouldn't know." Natigilan ako sa kaseryosohan ng pagsasalita ni Van.

"I can't. Dahil kahit saan ako pumunta, Jin can follow me. Nakalimutan mo na bang pareho kaming sa Montello High nag-aaral? At sa lahat ng taong umaakto na kaibigan ko, bakit kay Jin lang ako lalayo? Dahil ba sa isa siyang Dark Monarch?" Sinamaan niya ako ng tingin. Huh. Palagi ko namang natatanggap yan sa kaniya, parang di na ko natitinag.

"Dahil nakakairita sa paningin na aali-aligid siya sa'yo. Sino bang tao ang natutuwa kapag nakakakita ng langaw? I'm not like that Renfield dude." Oh, and I thought it's because of something really risky and serious. Para lang pala sa isang selfish at senseless reason. Nairita ako. I suddenly felt the need to defend Jin.

"I like his company. Pagtiisan mo na lang ang ganyang tanawin. At kung nakakairita talaga, ipikit mo na lang ang mga mata mo. Katulad ng gagawin ko." Humiga ako at nagtakip ng unan sa mukha sabay sabing, "Nakakairita ka kasi sa paningin, eh." Nagulat ako nang hilahin niya ang unan at ihagis iyon sa malayong bahagi ng kuwarto. Er! Ayoko sa lahat ang nadudumihan ang gamit ko!

“Ano bang problema mo!?” I sat up in my bed and screamed at him.

“I’m still talking to you,” walang emosyon niyang sagot.

“We’re supposed to be talking about Jin, right? You’ve said what you want. I’ve said what I want. I think we’re done. So please leave me alone. I want to go to sleep,” wika ko. Mukhang wala naman siyang narinig sa sinabi ko at tinitigan ako sa mukha. Naalala ko bigla yung eksena sa balcony. Er! With everything that’s happened, I should have forgotten how I got tensed and nervous whenever he looks at me like that. I felt self-conscious but I can’t help staring back. D mn it, Autumn! What’s really happened to my cheek?! To my amazement, he lifted my chin up and stared some more. The hell! He should be arrested for almost giving me a heart attack!

“Van, you should stop doing that,” I said silently.

“Stop doing what?” He asked.

“That! You’re staring at me as if I’m some kind of a strange thing.” He chuckled but I could still feel his dark aura in it.

“Strange, it is,” wika niya. Hinaplos niya ng mga daliri niya ang pisngi ko. I was about to push it away nang bawiin niya ring muli ang kaniyang kamay at tingnan. I nearly gasp subalit pinigil ko ang sarili ko. “It’s bleeding,” he said.

It’s my blood on his fingertips. Nagkibit-balikat lang ako ang binawi ang tingin mula sa mapulang dugo sa daliri niya. “It’s a wound from a cut. It’s only normal that it bleed,” wika ko. Mukhang nakalimutang lagyan ng plaster ni Autumn ang sugat ko sa pisngi kanina.

“It only means one thing: you could be defeated. You’re not that invincible,” he said, at saka kumuha ng cotton ball mula sa naiwang nakabukas na first-aid kit. I flinched when it touched my cheek. Mas nararamdaman ko ang sakit ng katawan ko, maging ang mga sugat, a few hours after. It’s an aftershock as adrenaline recedes in me.

“I didn’t say anything about me being invincible,” nakangiwi kong sagot. Well, the wound is stinging. It’s like he put an alcohol on that white cotton ball.

“But you’re acting like one. At yan rin ang inaakala ng lahat tungkol sa’yo,” seryoso niyang wika.

“Well, they’re all stupid. I was defeated on that damn bloody welcome party.”

“You’re pitiful, I know that.”

I scoffed, remembering. “And you’re evil. Back then, in the Nightwoods, you just left. If it was not for Ethan…” Hindi ko na tinapos ang sasabihin ko. Ayoko nang alalahanin ang mga pathetic moments. Mahabang katahimikan ang sumunod hanggang sa maramdaman ko ang band-aid sa pisngi ko.

“I knew he was coming,” mahina niyang sabi. Napatingin ako sa kaniya. Does that mean they— he— were intending to help me that time?

“Yeah. Of course,” sagot ko na lang. Wala akong balak kumpirmahin ang tanong sa utak ko. His face was too close to mine since he was securing the bandage when the door opened. Sa ganoong sitwasyon kami nakita ni Autumn na may dalang paperbags na mukhang naglalaman ng lunch. Van seemed to look bored nang lumingon sa kaniya while I immediately put on my blank face. Maang naman na napatingin sa amin si Autumn.

“Summer, you… you have a… a boyfriend?”

Oh, no!!! I thought she was good at reading an atmosphere like this, and jump to the right conclusion. Yung calculation niya just now, it was one of those comic fails. I was about to say no because— of course— I don’t have a boyfriend and Van Freniere is far from being my boyfriend. But Van beat me to it.

“Yeah. She has a boyfriend.”

AND THE WORLD HAD GONE CRAZY.

[15] Chapter 15: Taming a Monster

Late A/N:

Hey, guys! I received some friend requests. Could you please send me a message first about you coming from wattpad before I do all the accepting? And you might want to hear the OST for this chapter:

How To Save a Life – The Fray

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 15: Taming a Monster

Giovanni Freniere. He is the most complicated, terribly mysterious, and totally unreadable person that I've ever met in this lifetime. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pumasok sa utak niya at sinabi niya ang mga katagang iyon. And I was on my shocked state.

"You are her boyfriend?" Tanong ni Autumn. This is getting better and better. I still can't find the right words.

"You don't have to expect too much about your little sister here. She doesn't deserve me. She's not even a girlfriend material for an average guy. Who knows if she is having a gender crisis?" I was like a spark on a match stick that suddenly became a wild fire. Kung nakakamatay lang ang tingin na ipinukol ko sa kaniya, baka bumulagta na siya sa oras ding ito. But of course, he is Van Freniere at hindi madadaan sa tingin ang pagtapos ng buhay niya. And since he had that name, malabo ring maintindihan ko ang complicated mind patterns niya.

Autumn frowned. "Pero ang sabi mo…"

"I did not mean me. I meant Jin Cast."

What the heck is he talking about? Gusto ko siyang sapakin. Kumuyom ang kamao ko at akma ko siyang susuntukin sa dibdib. Subalit gaya ng balak ko

kaninang sipain siya palayo ng kama, it’s nonsense. Nahuli na niya ang kamao ko at ikinulong sa mga palad niya bago pa man ito lumapat sa kaniya.

“Jin is not my boyfriend!” Sigaw ko sa mukha niya.

“Who is Jin?” Tanong ni Autumn na mukhang hindi kinonsider ang aking apela. Van smiled evilly to me at saka sinagot si Autumn.

“That insect of a guy who always follows her wherever she goes these last few days. They’re actually pathetically sweet. Too bad, they’re gonna fall apart soon.” Mas lalong kumunot ang noo ko.

“Fall apart? Why? Eh, ngayon ko nga lang nalaman na meron pa lang boyfriend si Summer,” tanong ni Autumn na hindi pabor sa ideya.

Nagkibit-balikat si Van. “Continental Drift Theory.” Tumaas ang kilay ko sa sagot niya. I examined his face to know if he’s joking but he seemed damn serious.

“That’s tragic. But still, I want to meet him. Maybe he’s as gorgeous as you.”

Van smiled… seductively. It was the first time I saw him do that, even with all those arm-candies of blondies from Montello na paminsan-minsan niyang pinapatulan. Pag ganun kasi, kadalasan mukha lang siyang bored. I gritted my teeth. He was obviously flirting with my sister. That’s creepy. And it also irritates the hell out of me.

“Not even an inch. He’s an ass-face,” mayabang na sagot ni Van.

Huminga ako ng malalim at ipinikit sandali ang aking mga mata. Tinanggal ko rin ang force sa kamao kong hawak ni Van at naramdaman kong hindi na rin niya hinigpitan ang pagkakakapit rito.

“Makinig kang mabuti sa sasabihin ko, Autumn. Kalimutan mo ang mga narinig mo sa isang intruder at gang leader.” She gasped ng banggitin ko ang tungkol sa mga gangsters. She doesn’t really like violence. “Una, wala

akong boyfriend. Mauuna pa akong magkaroon ng alagang aso kaysa magkaroon ng hindi maipaliwanag ng siyensya na sakit ng ulo. Pangalawa, kabilang lang si Jin sa mga taong may buhay sa mundo na wala akong paki-alam. Pangatlo, huwag mo na ulit kakausapin ang taong yan pagkatapos ng sandaling ito kung gusto mo ng tahimik na buhay!" Wika ko.

"Pero, Summer, it's fine if you'll have a boyfriend. Hindi mo kailangang ma-stuck sa time na si Lawrence lang ang—" Tila pinitik ang pasensya ko ng pangalang iyon at galit akong napahakbang paalis ng kama at sumugod kay Autumn. I was free by then from Van's hold kung kaya't mabilis akong nakalapit kay Autumn. Galit at gigil ko siyang hinawakan sa braso.

"Bakit ka ba kasi pumunta rito?! Bakit hindi ka pa umalis?!" Galit kong sigaw sa kaniya habang iniinda niya ang sakit sa braso. I could see the realization on her face. She had said something terribly forbidden. But of course, we're not sisters for nothing. Minsan, naiisip kong kay Autumn ko rin nakukuha ang pagiging matigas ng ulo. Bilang patunay, pinagpatuloy niya ang subject kahit halos ihiwalay ko ang braso niya sa kaniyang katawan.

"Kailan mo ba ibibilang si Lawrence sa mga taong wala kang pakialam? Masyado ka ba talagang nasaktan noon kaya ka nagkakaganyan?" Muli kong ikinuyom ng libre kong kamao. Lahat ng emosyon noong panahong natalo ako kay Autumn nang hindi man lang siya lumalaban came back to me. Isa lang ang sigurado, sasabog na ito at may masasaktan.

"God, Summer. I chose you instead of him. Isn't that enough?" I'm seeing red now. Crap. The next thought is like an ignition… wrecking every reason and control I had left in me.

"But he f cking chose you!" And I lunged to hit her. She closed her eyes fearfully. 1…2…3…4… It never reached her. Naramdaman ko ang palad ni Van na nakakuyom sa palad ko at hinila ako palayo kay Autumn. She opened her eyes and looked at me unbelievingly.

"You… you will hurt me?" Tanong niya. A single tear dropped from her beautiful eyes. Van answered instead of me.

“Hey, have lunch at the cafeteria. I’m going to handle your crazy sister.”

Autumn immediately walked to the door and shut it close. Itinulak ko palayo si Van at akmang tatakbo sa pintuan subalit naabutan niya ako at itinulak ako pabalik sa kama. Sinubukan kong bumangon but he pinned me down like I’m some rogue criminal. His arm is restraining my neck.

“Let go!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya.

“And what? Let you run after your sister? Make another pathetic scene?”

“I… I…” Hindi ko alam kung anong sasabihin so I gave up. What’s the sense of fighting him? I don’t have any chance of winning against this devil.

“If she’s like Sebastian then I’m gonna let you kill her! Pero alam nating pareho na hindi mo ikatutuwa kapag nasaktan siya!” Natigilan ako at napatingin sa kaniya. Crap! He’s too close to me.

“Ano’ng pinagsasabi mo?” Tanong ko.

“You care for her,” wika niya. I faked a laugh just to mock his conclusion.

“She’s just another bitch with an angelic face. Babasagin ko ang pagmumukha niya.”

He smirked as if he knew something. “But you stopped before you hit her. Alam kong hindi ko maaabutan ang bilis ng temperament mo. And the truth is that you already stopped bago pa kita mapigilan. You didn’t intend to hurt her no matter how uncontrolled you are,” wika niya na ikinagulat ko. I was tongue-tied. Hindi ko naisip na mapapansin niya yun.

“Paano mo nalamang sister ko siya?” Tanong ko na lang.

“I’ve read your diary on your phone. And I’ve heard that the girl with a toy gun is Autumn Leondale. But what I want to know right now is all about this Lawrence dude.” I glared at him. Hindi man lang siya nagdalawang isip na banggitin ang letseng pangalang iyon? At saka ano bang paki-alam niya?

“Maybe Autumn is right. You really can’t get over that dude ‘cause you’re a stupid, lovestruck girl who’s still stuck on that time.” Tila mas nag-alab pa ang galit na nararamdaman ko. Ginamit ko ang buong lakas ko upang itulak siya palayo subalit hindi pa rin siya matinag. Isa siyang matibay na pader at mahirap buwagin.

“Go away, Van,” I hissed at him. He’s the last person that I needed at this moment. And this discussion is everything that I don’t wanna have. “Get away from me!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya.

“I will! If you stop being a lunatic!” Balik-sigaw niya sa mukha ko. Crap! With all these tensions, nagawa pang maregister ng utak ko ang strawberry-mint niyang hininga. It was like he had a strawberry champagne and took a mint afterwards. What’s happening to my sensations? And the hellish thing was that, I calmed down. Tinanggal na rin niya ang pressure ng pagpigil sa akin. Tumingin ako sa direksyong liban sa kaniya.

“I could now see the point as to why you were so envious of your sister. You two are really different but quite the same,” kalmado niyang wika.

“Kelan mo pa naging hobby ang dumaldal? Magsasalita ka na nga lang, tungkol pa sa walang kwentang bagay,” sagot ko. I could feel that he’s smirking. That devilish smirk again.

“You should know yourself, too well. We all have our own monsters.” It made me think. Do I always let my monsters win? I tolerate myself in being a monster in front of others. I just don’t keep watch if I’m being one in front of Autumn.

“You are like Sebastian. Envious, self-conscious, and rogue. That’s why you have that attitude. You have personal issues.” I frowned at him.

“How dare you compare me to that monster and cursed brother of yours!” Sagot ko. It was also shocking to know na insecure si Tres kay Van. But if that’s true, than he has a point. Van is almost perfect like Autumn. But unlike my sister, he is perfect in a darker way. And Sebastian is envious of him the way I am envious of Autumn.

“How do you feel about Sebastian?” Tanong ko. Wala naman talaga akong pakialam kung nilalagyan nila ng lason ang pagkain ng bawat isa o nagtututukan sila ng baril sa harap ng kanilang ama. Hindi ko lang maiwasang itanong since ikinumpara na niya ako sa pesteng Tres na yun.

“He’s a rogue. A big idiot. He’s hateful and cursed, and had taken a lot of devil’s lives. And he’s my brother,” sagot niya. It’s funny how those descriptions connect to the term ‘brother.’ Wait. If he’s like Autumn and I’m like that freak Sebastian, posible din ba na binibigyan din ako ng kapatid ko ng ganung description? Maybe not. They’re the same but in different shades.

“And I’ve never met someone like your sister. She seems to adore a stupid monster like you,” dagdag pa niya. I closed my eyes.

“It seems like Autumn’s got another fan in here,” tahimik kong sagot. He’s still smirking. Tsk. And I could feel him staring at my face.

“I’m not into admiring a plain, perfect white stone,” mahina niyang wika as he leaned in closer. I froze because of shock. He was almost lying over me. He moved his head between my head and my shoulder, on my neck… where he had kissed me when we were at the mansion. I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t even make any reaction. I just know that my heart is beating incredibly fast. It seemed like the sensation from the kiss is back. He’s giving me a heart attack! Ano bang nangyayari? Bakit sobra-sobra ang ups and downs ng emotion ko? Am I being so melancholic these past few days? At ang lalaking ito… This boy has the guts to tame my monstrous side. I’m starting to go crazy.

“I couldn’t even count your heart beat.” I could feel him smirking. Is he playing on me?!

And then suddenly, my stomach growled. He pulled back a little and looked at my face. Crap! Sa lahat ng tao na pwede akong ipahiya, bakit sa bwisit pang ito? At bakit sa ganitong pagkakataon pa? I blushed. I pushed him aside at umupo sa kama. Anak naman ng penguin, oh! Kelan pa ako nagkaroon ng kyubi sa sikmura? Tumayo si Van mula sa kama at kinuha

ang paper bag na iniwan ni Autumn sa sahig. Hindi ko pa man nakikita, mukhang masarap na ang nilalaman niyon.

“How thoughtful of her. Two lasagnas, monster fries and diet cokes. Oh, and an apple,” wika niya habang pabalik sa kinaroroonan ko. She’d always known that I loved lasagna as much as I love pizza. Iniabot sa akin ni Van ang isang lasagna and monster coke.

“She thought that we’re gonna have lunch together. Ibig sabihin, yung ibang pagkain ay para sa kaniya at hindi sa’yo,” wika ko nang mapansin kong hawak pa rin niya ang paper bag.

“Oh, thanks. Kahit alukin mo ako sa normal na paraan, I’m not going to have lunch with you.” Kinuha niya ang apple at inilapag ang paper bag sa kama. “But I will take this,” wika niya at naglakad patungo sa pinto. Finally, he’s going out.

“Bye, Ryuk. It’s really nice of you to leave me alone,” mahina kong sabi, which is, unsurprisingly, ikinatigil niya.

“Ryuk?” Tanong niya.

“Oh, Ryuk is perfect. Baka nga mainsulto pa siya dahil ikinumpara ko siya sa iyo,” sagot ko. He just looked at me weirdly, like I’m some kind of an alien species at saka lumabas ng pinto.

Tsk. What just happened? Talaga bang nakapag-usap kami nang hindi pinagtatangkaan ang buhay ng isa’t-isa? Uh. Sa lahat ng taong makakausap ko sa ganitong kondisyon ng aking pag-iisip, bakit siya pa? Brr! At yung bwisit na reaction ko kanina when he leaned his face on my neck. Darn! Why did I react that way? Why was I so nervous? I know now. He’s compelling me! He is playing with my emotions! Crap! I should have known that he has a knowledge on black magic.

I started to attack my lasagna. Sa kalituhan ng pag-iisip ko ngayon, kahit yata ano’ng pagkain ay lalantakan ko. And I think I made a record. Wala pa yatang sampung minuto ay naubos ko na ang laman ng paperbag. Now, I need to see Autumn. Alam kong na-offend siya kanina but this always

happens between us. I will bitch her and she will walk out looking so mad. Pero hindi naman iyon nagtatagal. Wala pa yatang limang segundo ang itinatagal ng galit ni Autumn. Iniisip ko nga kung bakit wala pa siya sa kumbento. She's on the process of being a saint. And with all the things I've done, I never said a single 'sorry.' Uh. Alam ko naman ang mga pagkakamali ko. Tsk. My pride just exceeds my weight ang height.

Sinubukan kong ayusin ang sarili ko. I doubt kung meron bang nabago sa hitsura ko. I'm gonna look for Autumn and start with saying, 'May binigay bang pera si Mama?' Weird as it is pero ako lang ang tumatawag ng 'Mama' sa aming ina. Autumn calls her 'Mommy.' Nasanay lang talaga ako sa 'Mama.'

Agad kong tinungo ang pintuan matapos kong i-check ang sarili ko. Tsk. Matapos ang gulong pinasok ko kanina, dapat nagmumukmok lang ako sa kuwarto. But I'm not an ordinary girl. Wala akong pakialam kung makita kong muli sina Trinity at magkaroon ng pangalawang round! Wala akong pakialam kahit dalawang beses pa nilang ipakita kung gaano sila ka-duwag. Kailangan ko lang hintayin ang pagrecover ko at---

Damn it! Napatigil ako sa paghakbang matapos buksan ang pintuan. It's really not going to end, huh?

Sa sahig ay nakalagay ang isang maliit na itim na kahon at may kulay-dugong laso. Nanginginig ang mga kamay na kinuha ko iyon at binuksan. Katulad ng dati, isang card na may note ang nasa loob. At halos gumuho ang mundo ko nang mabasa ang mensahe.

"Sh t!" I cursed at kahit masakit ang katawan ay awtomatikong napatakbo ako palabas ng dorm. Crap! Nasaan ba siya?

Halos nakukuha ko na ang atensiyon ng lahat sa bilis ng pagtakbo ko. It's Sunday afternoon at mabagal ang ginagawang pagkilos ng lahat. Ako lang yata ang nakakahilo ang rotation ng mundo. Pumunta ako sa cafeteria, wala siya. Halos nilibot ko na ang buong Montello High, hindi pa rin siya makita. Kahit si Jin, wala rin. I hate to admit this but fear is slowly creeping in my chest at habang di ko siya makita, napapamura ako sa isip ko. I ran to

the least possible place: Boys Dormitory. Uh. Crap! Kakapit na ako sa patalim. Tutal, siya naman ang pinagmulan nito, eh.

I harshly opened the door of the boys dorm. Nakuha kong muli ang atensiyon ng lahat. Some of them whistled. They don't even have an idea that I could give them World War 3.

"Where is Van Freniere?" Tanong ko sa kanila nang makapasok ako.

"You can start the show with us, Miss Leondale," wika ng isa na iniwan ang panunuod ng TV.

"Nasaan si Van Freniere?" Mas kalmado ko nang tanong. I saw Brent from their crowd and he's smiling like a devil. He seemed to notice that I saw him kaya lumapit siya sa direksiyon ko.

"Sabi na nga ba. You're one of his toys." F cksh t naman, oh. Nakakaubos ng pasensya ang mga tao ngayon, ah. He was about to touch me subalit hinuli ko ang kamay niya at tinabig ito palayo.

"Alam mo bang kaya kong buhusan ng gasolina ang dormitoryong ito at tapunan ng may sinding posporo? At alam ko rin na pag-aari mo ang pulang Cadillac sa labas. Ano'ng gusto mong kulay ng airpaint ang gamitin ko dun? O gusto mo din bang sunugin ko yun?" He looked bothered now.

"Don't you dare, Arsonist Bitch!" Nanggigigil at galit na galit niya akong tiningnan. Sa ganung tagpo nagsalita ang leader ng Dark Monarch.

"Wag mo nang dagdagan ang problema ko kay Jin, Brent," simpleng wika lang ni Zach Martinia. He was just on the couch, watching the scenario in front of him. "At ikaw, nasa itaas ang pesteng mga Black Government," tukoy niya sa akin.

Wala akong sinayang na oras at dali-daling umakyat sa second floor. At tila ako nasa isang maze na puno ng trials. Nakamamatay ang mag-level up.

"Where is Van Freniere?" Tanong ko sa isang crowd ng mga tao na nasa parang lobby ng second floor. Hindi sila sumagot. They just murmured and

laughed with each other. Nakakapikon talaga ang mundo.

“Uh. 5 Autistics, 3 Morons, 4 Assholes and the rest are ass-faces. How unfortunate of this place,” malakas kong wika na ikinatigil nila. They looked at me as if they have slow comprehension or maybe they were just shocked at my choice of words. Isa-isa silang galit na tumayo.

“Ass-faces?” Tanong ng isa.

“Oh, so you know which group you belong?” I gave them my bitchy expression. Tila kino-control nila ang sarili nila na atakihin ako. Bloody bad day.

Biglang lumabas si Makki mula sa isang kwarto, which I think ay kinaroroonan rin ni Van. I should have taken the emergency exit instead and climbed that tree. Hindi ko inaasahan na mas mahirap palang tahakin ang normal na daan. Napansin ako ni Makki at agad na lumapit sa akin.

“Hey, hey, hey, Dane! Beware. Don’t touch her or you’ll face trouble,” wika ni Makki. Nag-step back ang mga Black Government gangsters. “Ano’ng maipaglilingkod ko sa’yo?” Pabirong tanong sa akin ni Makki.

“Dalhin mo ako kay Van Freniere.” He motioned me to the room at agad ko iyong tinungo. Marahas ko iyong binuksan at agad na isinara. Gulat na napatingin sa akin si Van. Ah! Crap! He just came out of the shower and he only had his towel on! I should be panicking! Hindi ko na dapat napapansin ang 8-pack abs niya.

“Never thought that you’ll miss me so soon,” komento niya. I didn’t respond over his witty and sarcastic comment. I’m in a desperate situation kaya walang pag-aalinlangan ko siya nilapitan.

“You need to help me,” wika ko. He suddenly became serious.

“Help you with what?” Tanong niya. Iniabot ko sa kaniya ang black box. He opened it and read the note.

“I can’t find Autumn.” I was so helpless when I said that. I might commit suicide if something happened to her. Because this note! This freaking note is saying,

“YOU HAVE A WONDERFUL SISTER. AUTUMN’S LIFE IS WORTH TAKING THAN YOURS.”

[16] Chapter 16: Colder Farewells

Author’s Note (Actually, Editor’s Note):

You guys, this is Siel’s editor at your service giving technicalities on the POV issue (because Siel hates TECH and she’s given me the go signal). Napansin niya ang mga dumaraming katanungan on the issue of other character’s POV and we will answer it shortly.

Siel’s approach to Montello High is intended to meet standards of published YA Novels. Ibig sabihin, yung writing style niya ay base sa traditional writing rules sa halip na yung mga contemporary styles na kadalasang gamit ng karamihan sa mga wattpad writers.

Napili niyang ikwento ang MHSG gamit si Summer bilang narrator sa First Person POV. So we are experiencing these events through Summer’s eyes at kung ano lang ang nakikita, naririnig at nararamdaman niya ang malalaman natin. Sa standard book publishing, first person POV is written using a singular narrator kaya nag-iisa lang si Summer na nagkukwento. Traditionally, shifting POVs or POV ng ibang characters is used in Third Person POV or in novels with sub-books.

But Siel feels that the story will be better narrated by brash, sarcastic, bad-ass Summer than any other character of the book that’s why she used first person POV in the first place. She does not intend to write using other character’s POV. So we are not seeing any sub-books from the hot male gangsters’ POVs ever either. Just enjoy Summer’s thought patterns (minus her cussing siguro). [Note to Siel: Bawasan ang bad words, please]. Hope this clears things up!

Brace yourselves for future chapters and feel free to predict things but be prepared to meet doom dahil napaka-unpredictable ng story na ‘to. Minsan, ayoko na siyang icopyread dahil inaatake ako sa puso. Yes, cruel si Siel at siya ang reyna ng mga cliffhanger. Konti na lang, life-ruiner na rin sya. But rest assured na naappreciate nya maski pangungulit niyong mag-UD siya. (Kulitin niyo pa siya, please!) Er, napahaba na ‘to. Bye na, baka saktan ako nun, eh!

P.S. Let’s take a moment to appreciate Jin’s awesomesauceness (bahala ka sa buhay mo, Van!)

MUB, the bribed editor

Author’s Note (The REAL One):

Looks up and nods 50 times Haha. Yeah, MUB’s right. I don’t do technical explanations so I just told her to just say Journalism, Creative Writing, Young Adult Novels and Literature. And I’m so amazed that she went into details. Whoa! She’s frigging awesome!

Anyway, meron bang may talent dito on doing bookcovers and fanarts? I think we have a group on facebook (shocking!) so you can post it there on even on my wall. I just want to have an awesome bookcover and Adobe and I were not really on good terms. So here it is. Check out this song for this chapter because you might just find some clues:

Oh Crystal Ball – Keane

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 16: Colder Farewells

He looked at me with lack of emotion after he read the note. Alam kong suntok sa buwan ang ginawa kong paglapit sa kaniya. Subalit kung iisipin kong mabuti, siya lang ang may kakayahang tulungan ako sa ganitong bagay. Alam niya ang buong senaryo higit kanino man. And among all these people around me, he was the one I was with when I got into those unfortunate troubles.

“And I thought you hate her,” blangko niyang wika. I don’t even know the right things to say. I may not be the best sister in the world, I’m emotionless and I lack all the feelings but I care for her. I just don’t know the right way to show it.

“Well, she’s more important compared to me. Kaya kong ipagwalang bahala ang unang black box. But I won’t be able to take what the second---”

“There was a first box?” Kunot-noo niyang tanong.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t really matter---”

“And you didn’t tell me about it?” He was, once again, confusing me and making me doubt my actions. Pabagsak niyang nilapag ang box sa black velvet na kama— which I’m deadly sure is his. I’ve slept there before.

“Listen, Summer. This is not just about you. This is also about me and the mafia. And now, your sister is in it, too. Hindi na kailangang isa-isahin ng note na yan kung sino ang balak nitong puntiryahin. You should’ve told me earlier!” Galit niyang paliwanag. Ano na namang problema niya? Medyo uminit na rin ang ulo ko.

“Why the hell should I tell you!? I’m not even sure if you’re gonna help me! Who knows kung kagagawan itong lahat ng mafia mo o ni Sebastian!” He mocked a laugh that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Tres is too bold and stupid to hide his identity like this. At hindi siya mahilig sa suspense. If he wanted to kill you, then he’ll shoot you on the spot.” He got me there. I’ve seen kung gaano ka-straightforward si Sebastian, even with killing people. Ilang beses na ba niya akong pinagtangkaang barilin within the same second that I talked to him? Then something else hit me like a bomb.

“Ibig mo bang sabihin, may iba pang tao sa likod nito?” I’m on a panic now. Then I thought of something worse. “What if he’s just here in Montello? What if he’s got Autumn?” Kung iyon ang kaso, delikado ang lagay ko.

“Ano’ng sabi sa unang box?” Tanong ni Van.

“The first box was about taking my life. But the hell with that! I need Autumn to be safe!”

“You received a serious death threat and did nothing about it?” Galit at hindi makapaniwala niyang sabi.

“Can’t you see the point, Van? This is about Autumn!” Pasigaw kong wika. Bakit ba ipinipilit niya na dapat sinabi ko sa kanya ang tungkol sa unang box? He didn’t answer. Tahimik lang siyang tumingin sa kabilang bahagi ng kuwarto liban sa akin.

“What? You’re not gonna do anything?” Hindi makapaniwala kong tanong.

“Why should I? You ignored the first box. You can also do that to the second one,” seryoso niyang wika. I looked at him unbelievingly. Matapos kong lunukin ang pride ko at mag-effort na lumapit sa kanya, ito lang ang sasabihin niya?

“You’re really not gonna help me?” Tanong ko. I’ve already forgotten how he wasn’t dressed right now.

He turned to me. “Alam mo bang hindi ordinaryong buhay ang meron ako? I have a lot of more important things to do than help you protect your sister. But since you think you’re invincible, maybe you can do that yourself.”

Naramdaman ko ang labis na galit at pagkabigo. So in the end, he was not gonna help me. Even though he was actually the very reason why I’m in this situation. Kakasabi niya lang kanina that this was also about him and that blasted mafia of theirs! I should have known better than to expect anything from him. I was so disappointed. Damn it, I was hurt! I have to put my defense mechanism up! I smiled at him mockingly.

“Fine. Pero kailangan kong bawiin lahat ng pride na ipinusta ko rito,” wika ko. He looked at me, puzzled. And with all my effort, inipon ko ang natitirang lakas and gave him a hard blow to his face. He didn’t do

anything. Tinanggap lang niya ang binigay kong suntok. His lips bled. And he deserved it. Jerk!

“Salamat sa oras mo, Giovanni Freniere. Sinayang mo lang ang oras ko.” And I stomped towards the door and got out.

Damn him! Damn that man! And I hate myself now with the same degree that I hate him! Paanong pumasok sa utak ko ang posibilidad na tutulungan niya ako? I’m so stupid! Buong lakas kong sinipa ang trash can na nadaanan ko. The gangsters that I encountered just a while ago glared at me but they didn’t do anything. Too bad, I would have liked to let off some steam. I also received lots of glares before making it out of the Boy’s dormitory. I hate Van! I cursed that day that I knew him! I hate that I even stepped into this school! Now, what am I gonna do? Nasaan na si Autumn?

I was on my way back to the Girl’s Dormitory when someone blocked my way. Lucky day. It’s Patrick Penber.

“You seem upset,” puna niya.

Tiningnan ko lang siya at hindi sumagot. Ito ba ang sign na siya ang tanging makatutulong sa akin? Ang nakakainis bang detective na ito ang pwede kong asahan? If I got no choice… if it’s for Autumn… kaya kong sabihin lahat ng nalalaman ko tungkol sa Freniere Mafia. Ibibigay ko ang kahuli-hulihang detalye, nevermind that I die.

“Detective Penber,” I hesitated. “You need to help me.” I suddenly grabbed his arms. Kumunot ang noo niya.

“What happened Summer?” Tanong niya.

“Si Autumn---”

“Summer!”

Napalingon ako sa tumawag sa akin. It was Autumn. And she was with Mirden and Jamie. And crap--- with Tyler and Jin. What’s with the circle of friends? Lumapit sila sa direksyon namin. Mirden is weirdly looking at my

hand on Detective Penber’s arm. Agad ko iyong binitawan at humarap kay Autumn.

“Autumn? Are you okay?” Puno ng pag-aalala kong tanong. People around us looked at me like it was the first time that I did that. Well, it probably was.

“Yeah? Okay lang ako, Sis. Para namang hindi ako nasanay sa attitude mo. Forget about it.” Hell, that’s not what I’m talking about! But God! Thank God! She’s fine. At ikinagulat ng lahat ang sunod kong ginawa. Bigla ko siyang niyakap nang mahigpit. She hugged me back.

“Wow, Summer. I think I deserved that hug, too,” komento ni Jin. Agad rin akong kumalas mula sa pagkakayakap kay Autumn.

“You need to go home, Autumn. Please.” Paranoid na kung paranoid but it would be safer for her to get out of this place as fast as possible.

She frowned. “No, Summer. I’ll sleep here tonight. I already told you that,” sagot niya.

“Autumn, just listen to me.”

“I’ll stay just for the night. Pero promise, bukas nang umaga, aalis na ako.” I considered it. Of course, she’s my sister. Hindi na mababago ang desisyon niya.

“Yeah! Tapos magkaroon tayo ng group study mamayang gabi. Remember the exam? Kayang-kaya niya tayong turuan,” wika ni Tyler. Sabay-sabay silang umayon. Of course, Autumn knows everything. She could probably make it to top 5 kung nag-aaral siya dito.

“And Autumn likes me as your boyfriend,” nakangiting wika ni Jin. Uh.

“Summer, you were just asking for my help right?” Tanong ng detective. I looked at him and considered. I might need his help but my immediate dilemma has been solved. Maybe not now.

“No. I— I was about to ask you… uh, about Autumn. Kung nakita mo sila,” sagot ko.

“Are you sure?” Nagdududa niyang tanong.

“Of course, she’s sure,” singit ni Jin. He’s done it again, getting me out of a pinch. Masyadong perceptive na tao si Jin. But I could say that it helped sapagkat hindi na sinundan pa ni Detective Penber ang kanyang tanong. We said goodbye to him at naiwan siyang puno ng pagtatanong ang mga mata. I decided to never leave Autumn’s side which they all took as a weird thing.

Finally, it’s Sunday night and we’re done with dinner. Hindi ko alam kung paanong nagawa nina Jin at Tyler and mag-stay sa dorm hanggang curfew. Autumn really knows everything. Para siyang memory card in its maximum gigabytes at nagagawa niyang ipaliwanag in details ang mga bagay-bagay. She left them with their mouth hanging open. Mukhang nagkasundo sila ni Mirden on this matter. I just stared at my book, pretending that I’m not listening to them. Subalit mas madami yatang na-retain ang utak ko sa mga sinabi ni Autumn kesa sa libro. It’s always like this kahit noong elementary kami. I’ve always refused on listening to her. But in the end, sa kanya pa rin ang bagsak ko. She and mom always teased me about that thing, na kunwaring ayaw kong mag-aral pero alam nilang nari-retain sa utak ko ang mga bagay na tinuturo nila.

“Okay, ladies, gustuhin ko mang pasiyahin kayo sa buong gabi, subalit hindi pinapayagan ng oras ang ating pagsasama. Kailangan ko nang umalis. At bibitbitin ko na rin ang batang ito,” paalam ni Jin na tinapik sa balikat si Tyler. Masamang tingin lang ang isinagot ni Tyler sa kaniya.

“Ate Autumn, aalis ka na ba bukas?” Tanong ni Tyler. He’s really a kid. Feeling ate na niya si Autumn.

“Oo, eh. I’ll surely miss you, Tyler,” sagot ni Autumn na niyakap ang freshman. Lumapit si Jin for his turn.

“I’ll miss you, too, Au---” I cut him off and pushed him aside. I should protect Autumn from this kind of man. “Don’t be jealous, my love. You’ll always be the one who’ll fit perfectly in my arms,” nakangiting wika ni Jin.

Uh! Kung minsan talaga, parang gusto kong lagutan ng hininga ang nilalang na ito. I pushed him towards the door at sumunod si Tyler.

“Magsilayas na kayo habang hindi ko pa kayo binabawian ng buhay!” Wika ko.

“Harsh, babes.” Huli kong narinig kay Jin bago ko sila pinagsarhan ng pinto. I went to my bed and let my body collapse in there. Mirden and Jamie said their goodnights. Hindi ko na alam kung paano nawala ang tensyon sa aming lahat. Autumn lied beside me.

“Summer?” Mahina niyang tawag. Hindi ako sumagot. Alam kong alam niya na nakikinig ako.

“You seemed to be worried kanina. May problema ka ba?” Tanong niya. All of my fears went back. Subalit ilang oras na lang naman ay aalis na siya. Ilang oras na lang and she’ll be safe. I don’t have to worry about her anymore. At ilang oras na lang mag-isa na ako. I unconsciously throw my arms on her. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the instinct of someone who’s gonna be left behind.

Naramdaman kong ngumiti si Autumn. “I know you’re not gonna tell me, Summer. But believe me, it will soon be okay.” Huminga ako nang malalim. As always, her words are soothing.

“I believe in you,” mahina kong sagot. After few minutes, we both fell asleep.

I looked at Autumn uninterestedly as she told me the list of how to take care of myself. Jamie, Mirden and I are already awake at 5:30 in the morning. Waiting for her to drive away from Montello High. And leave me alone.

“You should always call me. Don’t turn off your phone. At sagutin mo naman ang telepono pag nakikita mo ang pangalan ko sa screen…” Mukhang hindi pa siya matatapos sa mga paalala niya. Be healthy, stay out of trouble, watch my attitude and be safe. Para namang hindi uso sakin ang survival instinct. Those are the things that would be easy to do for an ordinary teenage girl. But I am no ordinary teenage girl. I got issues.

Deadly ones. Which I tend to protect her from. And which I won't be able to escape.

"Treasure your friends." At tumingin siya kina Mirden at Jamie. Gumanti naman ng ngiti ang dalawa. She hugged me for one last time. "I'm gonna miss you, Summer. Bibisitahin ulit kita," wika niya.

"Yeah. Yeah. I know. I know. Let's stop this dramatic goodbye. May pasok ka di ba?" Bored kong sagot. She was about to go inside her car when she smiled to my direction. Well, not to me, but to the person behind me. Lumingon ako sa aking likuran at nakita ko ang source of disappointment and intense rage na naramdaman ko kahapon. He walked towards us and I fixed my gaze on the silver Honda Civic. Soon, I'll have my own car. Naramdaman ko ang pagtigil ni Van sa tabi ko but I refused to glance at him.

"Van. Good morning, my charming boy," Autumn said radiantly.

"You're leaving?" I hate that dark, enticing cold voice. I hate this guy who's talking to my sister.

"Yeah. You're up early."

"Can't sleep," sagot ni Van. Mirden and Jamie seemed aware of the tension I knew I was radiating off like the heat of the Sun. They looked at me worriedly.

"Nagre-ready ka for the exam?" Tanong ni Mirden.

"I don't do reviews," he dismissed her. What an arrogant jerk! At bakit ba kasi antagal umalis ni Autumn?

I pushed her lightly towards the car. "Leave now, Autumn," malamig kong wika. Autumn frowned at me and turned to Van.

"Hey, Van. You're the only one who could handle this little monster. Could you please look after her?" Hindi ko inaasahan ang sinabing iyon ni Autumn. I didn't know how to react. Hindi rin sumagot si Van. Mukhang

na-caught off-guard rin. Autumn smiled. “I know you will.” At sumakay na siya ng kotse. Mirden and Jamie kissed her goodbye while I just watched them. Tahimik ko lang na pinagmasdan ang paglayo ng kotse niya hanggang sa maglaho ito sa aking paningin. She’s gone. I’m alone.

“Oh. Crap! I still need to review some notes. See you girls!” Wika ni Mirden at tumakbo pabalik sa direksyon ng dorm.

“My phone! Summer, sunod ka nalang, ha?” Paalam ni Jamie at sumunod kay Mirden. It sounded like a conspiracy. They left me here with the most terrible devil that I don’t wanna be with. And we’re not saying a word to each other. Well, ayokong i-torture ang sarili ko kaya sinimulan ko nang humakbang palayo.

“Summer Leondale.” I don’t intend to stop pero puno ng authority ang boses niya. I was paralyzed. Kinalma ko ang sarili ko at hinugot lahat ng tapang upang hindi magpaapekto sa kanya.

“Tungkol sa note---”

“Stop it. I was just at the wrong time, and wrong situation and obviously chose the wrong person. It’s over. Let’s forget about it,” malamig at walang emosyon kong sabi.

“Kailangan mong ipaalam sa akin ang lahat ng bagay. Notes, threats, o kahit ano---”

I cut him off with a fake laugh. I looked at him sternly. He met my eyes and his expression turned colder and darker. Maybe he’s matching the anger that he had seen on my cold brown orbs. “I don’t need to tell you anything. I’m invincible,” wika ko.

Hindi niya pinakawalan ng tingin ang mga mata ko. Kung ordinaryong pagkakataon, baka mahirapan akong bawiin ang paningin from his punishing stare. But I really hate him. I hate people like him who gave me nothing but disappointment. Umiling ako at saka siya tinalikuran. This is how I get my revenge on things na natalo ako. I give them the cold shoulder. “And don’t ever talk to me again.” At saka naglakad palayo.

Bumalik ako sa dorm with a furious expression. How dare him talk to me! How dare him talk to my sister! Bakit nag-eexist ang katulad niya sa mundo?

Pumasok ako sa dorm at naabutang mag-isa si Mirden. At ang mas nakakagulat ay ang bagay na hawak niya.

“Summer, I…I…” I grabbed the first black box from her. Ano bang iniisip niya at pinakikielaman niya ang gamit ko? Obviously, Jamie’s not around.

“I’m warning you. Do not do it again, Mirden,” Malamig kong sabi.

“Summer… Detective Penber can help you. Sabihin natin---”

I stopped her with a wave of my hand. “Stop it, Mirden. This was just a prank. Maraming galit sa akin. It must be one of those cowards or bitches who wanted to get even,” wika ko at dumiretso sa banyo. No one could help me on this. Nai-set ko na ang utak ko to do it alone. And they left me no choice. I’m gonna face this danger on my own.

And I will have to win.

[17] Chapter 17: Shattered Glasses

A/N:

Whoah! Here it is! Who are the VIP’s here for the Kings’ (BigBang) concert? I’m begging for tickets! haha. I’ll probably go out of town to Batangas this weekend so I updated today. It would be kinda unfair if I go partying while there are poor souls out there waiting for the next chapter. Haha. If you’re in Batangas, you might see a girl watching a live band there. And guys thank you for supporting this story, I think we still got numbers for the What’s Hot? People, you’re really cool! And ikinatutuwa ko talaga ang mga reviews niyo every chapters. I’m appreciating your opinions about the characters and also your guesses as to what will happen next. I apologize too if I’m vaguely answering things about ‘when-to-update?’. Cause really, haha. I suck on time-management.

Anyway, here's the "Shattered Glasses" and you might wanna listen to 'Run For Your Life' of The Fray. I wanna hear your thoughts as to why I chose this track for this chapter. Warning for people who are wearing their hearts on their sleeves, you might unintentionally pull that out! haha. And yeah, there are fb groups, I think. Someone, please suggest a book cover for me. ·

Orayt, I'll leave you to your procrastinations now and I'll stop being nonsensical. haha. Really, blabbering sometimes!

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 17: Shattered Glasses

Everyone was busy for the exam. Mukhang ang lahat ay pinapahalagahan ang ranggong makukuha nila. According to Mirden, lahat ng estudyante ng Montello High ay magkakaroon ng exam sa araw na ito. Merong faculty and members of the school administration na awtomatikong pinag-aaralan ang profiles ng mga estudyante. At dagdag pa nila, patas at eksakto ang nagiging resulta ng ranking. And the devil is still unbeatable in first place.

I just finished answering the longest exam I had the misfortune of taking, ever. Halos kasabay ko lang si Mirden matapos na nagpaalam agad sa akin dahil may kailangan pa raw siyang gawin. Maliban kay Mirden, nakasabay ko rin sa exam ang isang miyembro ng Black Government who's referred to as Lowe at si Ethan Montreal. Well, isa lang kasi ang naka-assign na room para sa mga estudyanteng nagsisimula sa K-L-M ang apelyido. Mas nauna pa sa aming matapos si Ethan, pero hindi ko alam kung bakit tumatambay pa siya sa testing area. Hindi rin naman nakakatuwa ang pananatili ng limang oras sa kuwartong ito. I gathered my stuff at saka ibinigay ang makapal na test booklet sa gurong nagbabantay. Lumabas na ako ng kuwarto. Lunch would be next.

"Summer." I almost jumped nang lumitaw si Ethan sa likuran ko. Hinihintay lang ba talaga niya ako?

"Ethan," matipid kong sagot habang patuloy na naglalakad.

"How was the exam?" Isang normal na tanong.

“Shoot lang,” sagot ko. Well, masasabi kong halos nasagutan ko ang mga tanong. I’m not stupid academically. At isa pa, I listened to Autumn’s study session last night and since she’s also a control freak like me, she could control whatever comes in my brain.

“Let’s go grab some lunch,” wika niya at saka hinawakan ako sa braso. I intended to turn his invitation down pero, uh, like what they always do, he’s already dragging me.

Konti pa lang ang taong nasa cafeteria. Because there is still an hour before 12. Mukhang ang tanging naroroon lang ay ang mga naunang makatapos. I saw Mirden and Detective Penber discussing something on one of the tables. And of course, the devil and Makki and some of the Black Government gangsters on another. Tumango lang si Ethan sa kanila nang mapadaan kami. I refused to look at them. No dark Monarch. Mukhang first come, first serve ang Territorial Treaty ng dalawang gang, ah. Ethan chose a table near the glass window which was just across the devil’s table. He left me while he took our food from the counter. Pinipigilan ko ang sarili ko na mag-walk-out. It’s not comfortable to have a pair of piercing dark orbs burning at your back. I could feel him staring at me.

“Blueberry Cheesecake?” Tanong ni Mirden. Nasa malapit lang ang mesa nila. And whoah! How did Ethan know that it’s one of my favorites? And hell, pizza. I nodded calmly at saka sinimulan nang kumain. Really, wala na akong pakielam kung ang buong mundo ay nakatitig sa akin habang kumakain. Screw awkwardness!

“We haven’t talked since you went back from the Freniere mansion.” Wow. So ito ba ang magiging paksa ng usapan namin?

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Wala naman talagang dapat pag-usapan. May mababago ba if I spill all the shit that happened to me? Baka mas maging kumplikado lang ang lahat.

“Nag-wo-worry lang ako for you, Summer. Everyone knows na hindi magandang lugar ang Freniere mansion. Maaaring may masamang nangyari at hindi mo lang kayang sabihin. You could trust me.” I frowned.

Everyone’s telling me to trust them. Subalit sa kasalukuyan kong sitwasyon, hindi ko makukuhang mamigay ng tiwala.

I enjoyed the food. “Well, the mansion’s classically gorgeous… and creepy,” tangi ko na lang na sagot. I could still feel the devil’s glare directed at us. Mukhang binabantayan na ang mga salitang bibitawan ko. Napalingon ako sa entrance ng cafeteria at nakita ang pagpasok ni Trinity.

“Van!” Masayang tawag niya kay Van habang papalapit sa mesa ng mga gangsters. Hindi ko na siya sinundan ng tingin. Kailangang iiwas ko ang paningin ko sa mga nakakairitang bagay.

Minadali ko ang pag-ubos ng mga paborito kong pagkain. It’s not being nice with Ethan, but more of my own cravings. “Thank you for the lunch,” wika ko at saka tumayo. He stood up, too.

“Summer, I would really want to---” hindi na nagawang ituloy ni Ethan ang mga sasabihin dahil isang putok ang narinig namin na sinundan ng pagkabasag ng glass window sa tabi ng aming table. Nabalot ako ng takot at gulat at hindi makagalaw. Tila tumigil ang oras nang mga sandaling iyon at nakikita ko ang slow motion na paglipad ng shattered glasses ng haligi. It’s cutting on almost all the students in cafeteria. And some shards are cutting on my arms, too. Shit! Biglang bumalik sa reyalidad ang vision ko. Ethan is stepping towards me, subalit naunahan siya ng mabilis na nilalang na kumabig sa bewang ko palapit sa kanyang katawan at sabay kaming yumuko sa sahig. Ethan followed suit and crouched beside us. Lumingon ako sa taong nagdala sa akin sa ligtas na posisyon. And I found myself looking at a pair of cold and dangerous brown eyes.

“Van…”

“Everyone, dumapa kayo!” Mabilis rin ang reaksyon ni Detective Penber. I could see that Mirden is already on the ground beside the him. Limang tahimik na segundo ang lumipas bago nagsalita si Van.

“Mula sa Nightwoods. I’ll check it,” malamig at seryosong wika ni Van. I’m not stupid to be oblivious of what’s happening. I know that it’s a gun shot. And it’s a bullet that caused the broken glass window. “Stay here,”

wika niya at saka tumakbo palabas. Patungong Nightwoods. Kasunod lang niya si Detective Penber. Ethan remained at my side.

“They might get killed!” Wika ko na hindi maikakaila ang tensyon sa boses. Nababalot na rin ng takot ang paligid. This is about me, right? That bullet was intended to kill me. Someone’s already making sure I’m dead.

“Are you okay?” Tanong ni Ethan. Sasagot sana ako subalit narinig ko ang pagbukas ng pinto at saka nakita ang tumatakbong si Mirden patungo sa Nightwoods. Ano ba sa tingin niya ang ginagawa niya? Balak ba niyang mag-suicide? Tumayo ako subalit hinawakan ako ni Ethan sa braso. “Summer, don’t do anything stupid.” Pigil niya.

“I need to go after her.” I pulled my arms from him at saka tumakbo kasunod ni Mirden. Hindi ba niya alam na hindi bagay sa kanya ang maging epal? Gusto ba niyang ipahamak ang sarili niya? Ano bang iniisip ni Mirden? Lumingon ako sa cafeteria. Ethan was about to run after me, subalit mukhang napigilan siya ng mga responsibilities niya as Student Council Vice President. And why am I doing the same stupid thing like Mirden? I’m not into a heroine role here pero ipinagpatuloy ko ang pagtakbo. Van and Detective Penber were now inside the Nightwoods. At nilalamon na rin ng lilim ng kagubatan ang pigura ni Mirden. Paano ko sila makikita? And crap! Paano kung maka-salubong ni Mirden ang sniper? Or paano kung ako mismo ang makaharap sa sniper? I reached the mysterious Nightwoods but I couldn’t see anyone. Where are these suicidal creatures?

“Ahh! Let me go!” Mirden! Pumihit ako sa direksyong pinanggagalingan ng boses niya. Matinding kaba ang bumalot sa dibdib ko. Hindi ko maipagkakaila ang takot na nararamdaman ko. Makakaharap ko ba ang taong nagbabanta sa buhay ko? Siya ba ang sender ng mga black box? Ano’ng balak nila kay Mirden?

I was running fast… towards my death. Puwede ko nang tawaging na istupida ang sarili ko kung aalalahanin kong muli ang aking ginagawa. I should just run away. I should just turn back, escape and be safe. Subalit tuwing maiisip ko na maaaring mapahamak si Mirden, hindi ko mapigilang ma-bother. Ano ba kasing binabalak niya at pumunta siya rito? I stopped when I saw Mirden na hawak-hawak ng mga kalalakihang naka-tuxedo at

mask. Ganito rin ang nakita namin dati ni Jin nung panahong nagkaroon ng sunog sa boy's dorm. Noong panahong tinangkang paslangin ni Andrew Novou si Van.

They haven't seen me yet so I hid behind a tree. At inisip ko kung paano ko maililigtas si Mirden. Suprise attack? Confuse them? Agh! Saving her is like solving mathematical problems--- it's too complicated. I can't friggin' think of anything! I blinked. They're hurrying away. All six of them with an unconscious Mirden. What happened to her? I didn't see that! Is she okay? What did they do to her? Did they hurt her? Napa-praning na ako. Saan nila siya dadalhin? Sa dami ng mga panganib na nasa buhay ko nagyon, hindi ko na alam kung paano po-protektahan ang sarili ko. And then here comes Mirden. Kahit ano pang kamangmangan ang ginawa niya para mapunta sa ganitong sitwasyon, hindi ko kayang pabayaan siyang dalhin ng mga taong ito. Hindi puwedeng mapahamak siya sa harap ko. I need to help her!

Without any doubts, I started to run towards them. Medyo nakakalayo na rin sila subalit ito yung mga panahong gagawin ko ang lahat mabawi lang ang may katangahang si Mirden. I was quickly advancing towards them when someone appeared and blocked my way. I bumped into a hard, wide, muscled chest. I almost cursed loudly but that person clamp his hand into my mouth and pull me towards a big tree. I looked up at him and glared as I recognized who it was. Van Freniere. Crap! Nagiging balakid na naman siya sa landas ko.

"Shhhh," aniya habang sinisilip ang papalayong grupo. Damn! I might lose them! I might lose Mirden! I tried to push him away but he's a concrete wall. I couldn't go past him. "Stop being an idiot!" He hissed angrily. Pinukol ko siya ng masamang tingin. Ano na naman bang problema niya? Sinabi ko naman na huwag niya akong pakielaman, ah! We stayed like that for the whole painful ten minutes. His hand on my mouth while his other hand imprisoned me against the tree. He surveyed the surroundings with eagle eyes while I never stopped glaring at him. At nang masiguro niyang ligtas na ang paligid ay saka niya ako pinakawalan. Buong lakas ko siyang tinulak palayo.

"Ano ba sa tingin mo ang ginagawa mo Van Freniere?!" Galit kong sigaw sa mukha niya. Hindi niya ako pinansin. Sa halip ay kumuha ng sigarilyo at

saka sinindihan. Inis na inis kong kinuha ang sigarilyo mula sa bibig niya at tinapon iyon. “Kinakausap kita!” I said grudgingly but he pulled out another cigarette at saka iyon sinidihan muli. Kinuha ko ulit iyon sa bibig niya at nang akma kong itatapon ay nagulat ako nang hawakan niya ako sa braso at hapitin palapit sa kanya. He leaned down on me and he’s too closed. His lips are just inches from mine. And automatically, my frigging heart is hummering on my chest. Napipi ako at saka tumitig lang sa kanyang mga mata. Nakatingin rin lang siya mga mata ko. And the weird thing was, every rage inside of me was melting. Tila nakalimutan ko na ang lahat sa paligid ko. Lahat nang iyon ay nalaglag sa lupa kasama ng sigarilyo mula sa aking kamay.

“What do you want me to do, Summer? Hayaan kang habulin ang mga taong alam nating hindi magdadalawang isip na baunan ng bala ang walang laman mong utak?” He hissed still inches from my lips. I was brought back again to the annoying reality. I was almost willing to bet that the scenario was in a passionate and romantic state, to my horror. Thankfully, it was ruined with our sharp words to each other. He practically called me stupid! Yeah, I hate him, with passion.

“But they got Mirden!” Sagot ko. I still find it hard to breath by being so close to him.

He sighed. “Paano mo maililigtas si Mirden kung pareho kayong mahuhuli?” Natigilan ako. Hindi ko naisip ang ganitong bagay. I always tend to go without thinking. Pero hindi nga ako makapag-isip ng matino kanina! “You need a plan. That’s not bravery, Summer. That’s stupidity. But what am I gonna expect from you?” Patuloy niya. He slowly released me as I think things. How dare he tell me what to do? I hate him! And I hate that he’s right. I hate the thought that I look stupid compared to him. Tiningnan ko siya ng masama.

“I don’t do dirty works. Hindi ko forte ang ganitong bagay,” asik ko sa kanya.

“Just admit that you’re an idiot.” Tila umakyat ang dugo ko sa utak. Kung kaya ko lang paslangin ang isang tulad niya!

“So what about Mirden?” Tanong ko. Tumingin siya sa aking at saka umiling.

“She’s not my responsibility.” Walang emosyong wika niya. Hindi makapaniwalang tinitigan ko siya. Dang! Wala talaga siyang kwenta!!! And I thought that I was bad enough. He is really a worse monster than me.

“Nababaliw ka na ba? Puwedeng mamatay si Mirden. And it’s your fault in the first place!” Sigaw ko. I know that I’m being hysterical but the thought of a cold and lifeless Mirden makes me shiver. Kumuha siya ng bagong sigarilyo at saka sinindihan. Smoking bastard.

“Listen here, Leondale. I’m in a mafia. Death is just a normal damn thing to me. And those who’d been judged are less significant. All of them are stupid. Sa ganitong sitwasyon pinili ni Mirden na gumawa ng eksena, and that’s stupid. And those men, hindi nila magagamit si Mirden against me, that’s more stupid. It’s like a chess. A touch-move for all the idiocy,” naiinis niyang sabi at saka humithit ng sigarilyo. Pinigil ko ang paghinga nang magbuga siya ng usok. Wala akong mapapala sa pakikipag-usap sa kanya. This is like when I thought Autumn was missing all over again. Wala talaga siyang pakialam at naiinis ako! The thing is, sarado ang utak ko para makinig sa kanya. Humakbang ako pabalik ng school at tumigil nang ilang distansya.

“This is not just about you and the mafia, you stupid, uncaring idiot. Death is not a normal damn thing to me. Babawiin ko si Mirden. At huwag kang makikialam,” wika ko. Narinig ko pa ang mga curses na binitiwan niya bago ako tuluyang makalayo.

Naging malaking balita sa school ang pagkakakidnap kay Mirden. Jamie was so worried at tahimik lang kami habang nakaupo sa sarili naming mga kama sa dormitory. Unfortunately, nasa abroad ang mga magulang ni Mirden and there was no way to contact them. Only Mirden who seriously had her way on securing her privacy. What an ass-genius! Naputol ang pag-iisip ko nang makarinig ako ng hikbi. I turned to Jamie who was trying to hold back some tears.

“Hindi ko na naiintindihan ang lahat! Why Mirden? I miss her!” Hagulhol ni Jamie na tuluyang pinakawalan ang luha. Madilim na ang paligid. Mukhang matinding pagpipigil ang ginawa niya dahil ngayon lang siya umiyak. Naging matatag siya kanina habang tinatanong ang mga pangyayari. Tiningnan kong muli ang bakanteng higaan ni Mirden. Wala roon ang weird at nerdy looking na babaeng nagbabasa ng manga. There’s no intelligent girl who had quicky assessed the situation on the mall and ran as I told her to. Why the hell did she run to the nightwoods? Kailangan niya akong bigyan ng eksplanasyon.

“Ibabalik ko si Mirden dito,” wala sa loob kong nasabi.

Natigilan si Jamie sa pag-iyak. “Paano mo gagawin iyan nang hindi ipapahamak ang sarili mo?” Tanong niya. Hindi ko rin alam ang kasagutan. Ang tanging alam ko lang ay kailangan kong iligtas si Mirden.

“If there’s no other way, then I won’t hesitate,” tangi kong naisagot. Halos hindi ako nakatulog nang buong gabi sa pag-iisip ng paraan. Ni hindi ko alam kung saan magsisimula. Hindi ko alam kung sino ang nasa likod nito. Hindi ko alam kung kanino ko babawiin si Mirden. Hindi nakapagtatakang kasama sa panaginip ko si Mirden. Naka-piring ang mga mata at nasa madilim na lugar. I knew that it was just a dream. Subalit kahit sa panaginip ay pinipilit kong tanungin ang walang imik na si Mirden tungkol sa kinaroroonan niya… and then everything fades to black. I thought the dream is over. Subalit napalitan iyon ng isang pamilyar na panaginip. There is a snake staring at me. And when I turned to another direction, I saw Van, smiling at me brilliantly… enchantingly. And then a gun shot… and I run to catch him as he falls…

“SUMMER! Summer!” Namulatan ko ang may namumugtong mga mata na si Jamie. Mukhang magdamag na nag-aksaya ito ng luha. Maliwanag na rin ang paligid, patunay na umaga na. “Summer, you were having a nightmare. You’re as pale as the dead!” Wika niya. Umupo ako sa kama habang kinakalma ang sarili ko mula sa kaba.

“F cking dreams,” sagot ko at saka nagtungo sa banyo. Inihanda ko na ang sarili ko sa pagpasok. Hindi naapektuhan ang klase sa Montello High ng mga masasamang panyayari. Pansamantala ring isinara ang school cafeteria

para sa imbestigasyon at sa pagsasaayos nito. Kakalabas ko lang ng Girl's Dormitory nang lumitaw sa harap ko ang taong hindi ko inaasahang makikita ko.

"Summer Leondale. You have to come with me," wika ni Detective Patrick Penber. He seemed so haggard and sleepless. Is it so bad na mawalan ng greatest fan?

"What is it all about?" Tanong ko habang naglalakad kami.

Lumiko kami sa direksyon patungong cafeteria. Napansin ko din ang sugat sa braso niya dulot ng mga bubog kahapon. I also had my share of wounds. "It's about Mirden." Binigay ko sa kanya ang aking atensyon. Siya ang huling nakausap ni Mirden kaya may makukuha ako sa kaniya, bukod pa sa isa siyang detective.

"Babawiin ko siya. Kailangan ko ng impormasyon," wika ko.

"Sa tingin mo ba hindi ko naiisip ang ganyang bagay? Mirden told me about the death threat that you're receiving. We're investigating that." What the heck! So iyon ang pinag-uusapan nila. Mirden was cooperating with Detective Penber.

"Hindi mo na sana siya dinamay pa sa imbestigasyon. She's just a teenage student! Alam mong delikado ang ganyang bagay!" Wika ko.

"You are also a teenage student, Summer. Siya rin ang nagpumilit at nag-aalala siya sa'yo. Gusto ka niyang tulungan. Dapat noon mo pa ito sinumbong sa amin. Mahalagang impormasyon ang naibibigay niya. Kung hindi dahil sa kanya, hindi ko pa malalaman na nakakatanggap ka ng mga banta sa buhay mo. If you just cooperated with me, then she would have been safe and sound and out of this mess!" Naiinis na wika niya. He looked frustrated. Well, there are just things na kailangang itago specially kung hindi mo alam ang mukha ng kalaban mo. Hindi na lang ako sumagot hanggang sa makarating na kami sa cafeteria. Tumango lang siya sa isang pulis na nagbabantay at sumaludo sa kanya.

"Bakit tayo nandito?" Tanong ko.

“To show you why Mirden ran towards the Nightwoods.” Pinakita niya sa akin ang bakas ng bala sa isang pader. Balang tumagos at bumasag sa glass wall. “The target of the sniper is not Van… It’s also not you. That’s sweet. You’re lucky.” Tiningnan ko ang katabing mesa ng pader. Dito nakaupo sina Mirden at Detective Penber.

“It was me. And she quickly realized that nang makita ang pader. Maybe she came after me to give me a warning. I should have known na natutunan niya ang brave suicidal move na yun mula sayo.” I looked at him with my mouth gaped open. Mirden’s really stupid. And it’s like commenting on myself, too. But on the other hand, she’s really that smart to calculate everything Penber just said. Wala akong masasabi pagdating sa thinking ability ni Mirden. Yun nga lang, gusto kong linawin sa kanya na hindi niya field ang mga physical part ng sitwasyon. She should have thought about that. Or maybe, she actually knew it. Sinipat ko ang guwapo at rugged na hitsura ng detective.

Alam ni Mirden na maaari siyang mapahamak. Pero dahil nasa peligro ang buhay ng hinahangaan niyang detective, sinuong niya ang panganib. I don’t really get those people. Can you call it love when you’re willing to die? It doen’t make any sense. If that’s how it is, then love really sucks.

“And now, you’ll have to be with me,” seryosong wika ng Detective. I frowned at him. Am I building an alliance?

“Let’s save Miss Montgomery,” he announced. Well, the hell with the annoying stuff, but I’m into this.

“What’s the plan?” Tanong ko.

Yeah. It’s an alliance.

[18] Chapter 18: School of Sick Heroes

Songs for this chapter:

Iris by Goo Goo Dolls

Make Damn Sure by Taking Back Sunday

Chapter 18: School of Sick Heroes

“Hey, why are you always with that detective? I thought you didn’t like him?” Tanong ni Jin habang naglalakad kami patungo sa Montello Main Building. I was shocked when I saw him outside the Girl’s Dormitory waiting for me. Akala ko kasi, nagsawa na siya sa bodyguard role nya nang hindi ko nakita maski anino man lang nya kahapon. I decided to have lunch in the dorm instead of going outside the school. Hindi pa rin kasi maaaring gamitin ang cafeteria. Hindi ko na rin pinasukan ang mga pang-umaga kong klase. Kasama ko si Detective Penber at pinagdiskusyunan namin ang posibleng paraan para mailigtas si Mirden. Jin was outside the dormitory after lunch, waiting for me.

Tapos ay agad syang humingi ng tawad dahil sa nabalitaan nyang nangyari kay Mirden. Shame on me but I was actually expecting him to have started hovering around me the moment na mabalitaan nyang nawawala si Mirden. Ang sabi nya, he wanted to pero dinetain sya ni Zach. Totoo nga yata ang sinabi ni Zach nung isang araw na nagiging problema na nya ang pagbuntot sa akin ni Jin kaya baka gumagawa na ito ng paraan. Siguro tama siya. Kung si Jin ang kasama ko kahapon, posible kayang mapahamak rin siya?

“It doesn’t mean I like him now,” sagot ko sa tanong niya. I could say that I’d really made an alliance with Detective Penber. But it was all for Mirden. I just needed to save Mirden and if hanging out with annoying people is what I have to do, I’d do it.

“I’m serious about this, Summer. I know why you’re always with that Detective. I don’t think it’s a good idea. Mapapahamak kayo. Mapapahamak ka,” wika ni Jin. I know about that. And I’m also serious about this.

“Jin, pwede ba? Bakit ba nagiging malaking bagay sa’yo na nakikipag-usap ako kay Detective Penber? He was just telling me something,” inis kong sabi.

“He’s telling you about what?” Muli niyang tanong. “About dangerous stuff like saving Mirden? I told you, I know. Kilala kita, Summer.” Marahas akong huminto at humarap sa kaniya.

“Ano bang paki-alam mo, Jin? Sa huli kong pagkakaalam ay kakilala lang kita at kapareho lang ng school na pinapasukan. Wala akong kahit na anong kaugnayan sa’yo upang umasta ka ng ganyan.” Saglit na napawi ang ngiti niya dahil sa mga sinabi ko. Subalit bumalik din ang carefree nyang ekspresyon.

“Well, Autumn is already convinced I’m your boyfriend. And in case you have forgotten things, I’m also your bestfriend. So I think those titles are both enough for me to be worried about you and ask questions,” sagot niya. Hindi ko na siya sinagot at ipinagpatuloy ang paglalakad. Wala na talaga syang pag-asa.

“Summer, masyadong marami nang delikadong nangyayari at nag-aalala ako. Hindi rin maalis sa isip ko na maaaring maging isa ka ring biktima ng mga gulong ito.”

“Kaya ko ang sarili ko,” walang emosyon kong sagot. Pinigil ko rin ang magbuntung hininga. Parang ilang beses ko nang naririnig sa iba’t-ibang tao ang mga dialog na ito lately. Hinawakan niya ako sa braso at pinigilan sa paglalakad at saka iniharap sa kaniya. Nawala na ang carefree look. All that’s left in his expression was seriousness. I looked straight into his eyes and realized that he’s showing me his soul. He’s trying to be vulnerable in front of me and I can’t help but think that it was brave and admirable. Pero naisip ko rin na maling-mali ang timing nya dahil nasa gitna kami ng school yard at kasalukuyang tinatakpan ng ulap ang sinag ng araw.

“Sa tingin mo ba ay nagbibiro lang ako nung sinabi kong gusto kita? Gusto kita, Summer. I don’t expect you to reciprocate that. But do you know how it feels when you’ve vowed to yourself to protect someone and that cold someone is treating you like a sick joke? God, Summer! I’ve done everything and took your rejection like a man, damn it! I even swallowed my pride! Pero gusto kong malaman mo na importante ka! Ano pa bang kakornihan ang gusto mong gawin ko para lang maniwala kang may mga

taong ayaw kang makitang mapahamak, hindi dahil sa iniisip nila na mahina ka kundi dahil mahalaga ka para sa kanila?!”

Hindi ako makapaniwala sa nakikita ko. Were those tears threatening to spill out his eyes? Tears from a gangsters eyes and they’re for me. Hindi rin ako makapaniwala sa naririnig ko. He said I was important and well, si Autumn and Mama lang naman ang nagsasabi sa akin nyan noon . But they’re family so they were supposed to, I guess. But I can’t deal with this right now. So wala pa ring emosyon ko syang tiningnan.

“Bakit mo sinasabi ang mga bagay na yan?”

“I know, alam ko na walang halaga sa’yo ang mga sinasabi ko. And believe me, I know na hindi ko dapat sinasabi ito,” seryoso nya pa ring sagot.

“Hindi bagay sa’yo,” komento ko.

Payak siyang ngumiti. “You were seeing me as a cool person, then.”

“And pathetic, too.”

Huminga siya ng malalim at saka hinawakan ang mga kamay ko. Naalala ko ang Jin na humawak nang kamay ko nung panahong takot na takot ako sa Nightwoods. Did he really mean what he said?

“Yes, it’s pathetic, I’ll admit. Natatakot lang ako,” mahina niyang wika.

Tiningnan ko siya habang nag-umpisa muli kaming naglakad patungong Montello Main Building. And I still can’t believe what I’m hearing. “Natatakot?” Mahina kong nasabi na nakaabot sa kanyang pandinig. How is it that a gangster like him is afraid?

“Natatakot ako para sa’yo. Kapag may nangyaring masama sa’yo… Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng gagawin ko, Summer.” Sagot niya. Ilang minuto kaming tahimik habang tinatahak namin ang daan patungo sa classroom ng klase ko.

“Jin, I don’t know why you’re feeling that way or if what you’re feeling is real. Pero isa lang ang sisiguraduhin ko sa’yo, hindi ko ipapahamak ang

sarili ko. I might do some scratches and wounds pero makikipaghilahan ako kay Kamatayan kung sakaling pagtangkaan niya ang buhay ko," seryoso kong sabi. It's a vow to myself and something to make him feel at ease.

He smiled. "I know, because you're bad-ass like that." And then, surprising me, he pulled me against his chest. "Makikipagkasundo ako kay Kamatayan, masiguro ko lang na ligtas ka."

I heard from Autumn na may mga healing and relaxing component daw ang mga yakap. Sinabi nya yun sa akin noong nagrereklamo ko dahil hilig nya akong yakapin. Hindi ko inaadmit sa kaniya but some of her hugs were welcome. Kaya in a way, nakakagulat ang ginawang iyon ni Jin. I stopped breathing. But I didn't want to break away immediately either.

Sa ganoong sitwasyon bumukas ang pinto ng classroom and I found every pair of eyes inside staring at us. Among them ay nakita ko ang gulat na rumehistro bago unti-unting naging matatalim at tila salamin ng kamatayan ang mga mata ni Van Freniere. He looked straight to my eyes. I decided to ignore him.

"Damn it, Jin," bulong ko kay Jin. Tumawa siya ng mahina.

"I know, I'm making you uncomfortable." Kumalas din sya sa pagkakayakap sa akin pero bago bitawan ang mga kamay ko ay pinigilan muna niya akong pumasok. "Take care," he said at saka nakangiting nagtungo sa sarili niyang klase. Nang pumasok ako sa classroom, I heard whispers. I just frowned at naglakad patungo sa aking upuan.

"That's Jin Cast, right? Is he your boyfriend?" Tanong ng isang babae mula sa unahan. She's pretty, and a cheerleader type. Hindi ako sumagot. Wala akong balak na sagutin ang ganitong klase ng mga tanong na tila ba nasa isang showbiz talk show ako.

"So cute! Sabi ko naman sa inyo, sila na, eh! Di ba nga lagi silang magkasama lately?" Narinig kong sabi ng isa. Masyado naging maingay ang paligid habang pinag-uusapan ang walang kwentang bagay.

“Bagay naman sila. Jin is—” Hindi na naakapagpatuloy ang pagsasalita ng isa pang babae. Tatlong libro ang lumipad pahampas sa white board mula sa likuran. Lumingon ako sa pinaggalingan at nakita ko sina Van at Makki. Makki was absorbed with playing something on his I-pad and Van looked bored. Natahimik ang lahat.

“You should learn to keep your mouth shut or I’ll make you swallow some hardbound books.” Monotone niyang sabi. Wala nang nangahas pang magsalita. This jerk really knows how to control things into his liking. Nairita ako. Tumingin ako sa engrossed na si Makki at saka naisip ang isang bagay.

“Hey, Makki,” sigaw ko.

“Cute girl!” Balik-sigaw niya.

“Haven’t talked to you in a while,” sagot ko.

“Yeah, I miss you, too!” Wika niya.

“Oh, but I want to see your abs.” And just like that, another commotion from the girls broke out. Ganun kabilis ibalik ang nakakainis na ingay. Maraming umayon sa sinabi ko kay Makki. I glanced at Van who’s going to transform into a monster any second now. Para kaming bumalik sa umpisa. No mafias, no deaths and only pride and attitudes. Tumayo si Van dala ang isang libro at lumapit sa akin. Tumayo ako at matapang na humarap sa kaniya nang huminto sya sa tapat ko. Everyone became silent again and watched as tension builed inside the corners of the room.

“Iniisip mo bang hindi ko gagawin ang mga sinabi ko kanina?” Iritable niyang tanong.

“That book doesn’t book delicious, anyway,” bored ko namang sagot. I was so tired of him controlling everything. Gusto kong ipakita sa kaniya na hindi siya ganun ka-dominant.

I was shocked when he cupped my chin and pulled me towards him. Here it go again. Abnormal pulse rate. Hindi ito ang inaasahan kong magiging

reaksyon niya and I didn’t know how to react. His face moved closer to mine. I can’t breath. Where were all my guts? Where did all the bravado go?

“I must agree that this book doesn’t look delicious. That’s why I got some prettier idea to keep your silly mouth shut.” His voice was husky and it lingered in my dumbsturck soul. Crap!

“I… I…” Damn it! I couldn’t even pull up a sharp remark. I looked at his lips and a smile formed.

“Oh, how I wish your stupid boyfriend can see us.” And that’s when I blinked. I fall back to reality and pushed him away with a glare. Nakikipagkumpetisyon ba sya sa kabilang gang gamit ako?! Damn him!

“Are you using compulsion?” Putol ang hiningang tanong ko. He must be compelling me, that’s it! Dahil hindi ito isang normal na reaksyon. He just stared at me hanggang sa bumukas ang pinto at pumasok ang aming guro. I was still shaken hanggang matapos ang klase. I’m gonna make sure not to let him win again. So stupid. That was so stupid.

Iniwasan kong muling magtagpo ang mga landas namin ni Van Freniere hanggang sa matapos ang mga klase ko sa araw na ito. I was thinking that if I could erase every unpleasant thing in my life, baka sakaling ligtas si Mirden sa mga oras na ito. I could have been at Arturia with Autumn. I could have been a better girl and would not mess with gangsters. Or even with the mafia. I would never have met these people. I would be like Autumn…

But wishing for any rewinds in life are for cowards. They are scared of facing the consequences of the things they have done. And I’m not one of those people. I might not be thankful of what’s happening now but I’ll make sure that I’ll make things right. I don’t have to change my past no matter how tragic it was.

Isang araw na rin mula nang mawala si Mirden and I was wondering if she’s still safe for now. Of course, she isn’t. I was wondering if she’s still alive.

“Leondale.”

Napahinto ako sa paghakbang sa front steps ng Girl’s dormitory. Nagawa kong itaboy si Jin sa paghahatid sa akin. I saw the devil leaning against the wall. Mukhang hindi ko siya napansin kanina dahil sa lalim ng iniisip ko. I ignored him at akmang gagawa ulit ng hakbang subalit muli siyang nagsalita.

“Whatever it is you’re doing, you have to stop it now.” Napakunot ang noo ko. Ano ba ang ginagawa ko? Bukod sa hindi ko pagsang-ayon sa kagustuhan niyang katahimikan kanina ay wala na akong maisip na iba pa. Pumihit ako at naglakad sa direksyon niya. He was smoking a cigarette.

“Sinabi ko naman sa’yo na huwag mo akong pakikialaman, di ba?” Walang emosyon kong wika. Tanging ang matatalim na tingin ko lang ang nagpapakita ng nararamdaman ko.

“This is a warning, Summer. Do you even know how to listen?” Seryoso niyang tanong.

I gave him a sarcastic smile at saka umiling. “I don’t take warnings and I don’t listen to people, particularly, like you,” sagot ko.

“You have no idea of the danger you’re throwing yourself into.” Inis niyang tinapon ang sigarilyo.

I shrugged. “That’s my problem. Not yours.”

“Summer---” Hindi niya natuloy ang sasabihin dahil sa isang musikang biglang pumailanlang.

“... And I’d give up forever to touch you

Cause I know that you feel me somehow

You’re the closest to heaven that I’ll ever be

And I don’t want to go home right now---”

His phone was ringing. And that song would have been lovely if not for the situation. If there are the right persons involved. Because it's definitely not us. Oh, crap! What am I thinking?! He fished his phone out from his pocket.

"Tres," sagot niya sa telepono. My mind became alert as I heard the name. Naaapektuhan pa rin ako ng taong iyon kahit pangalan lang niya ang naririnig ko. He's one of those people that I never wanted to see again.

"I'm suspiscious about that transaction," muli kong narinig sa sinabi ni Van. He looked at me without even concealing their conversation. Humalukipkip lang ako habang naghihintay ng iba pa niyang sasabihin. I know that I looked stupid eavesdropping but hell, I might find some hints.

"I'll leave the decision to you," wika ni Van at saka tinapos ang tawag. "You were listening, obviously," komento niya.

"Baka banggitin ni Tres kung saan niya itinago si Mirden," diretsa kong sagot.

"Hindi hawak ng mafia si Montgomery," sagot niya. Magsasalita pa sana ako subalit isang pulang vintage Mustang ang paparating. Tiningnan lang namin iyon hanggang sa huminto ito sa tapat ng dorm. Lumabas si Detective Penber mula sa sasakyan at saka lumapit sa kinaroroonan namin.

"What's this? An overtime?" Sarkastikong turan ni Van.

Bahagyang ngumiti si Detective Penber. "Well, sinusundo ko si Summer for a dinner." Tumaas ang kilay ko. Well, I was actually expecting him to come and talk to me any moment now. But for a dinner?

"Yeah," sagot ko at lumapit sa Mustang. I love vintage cars.

"This is not the Boy's Dormitory, Mr. Freniere." Narinig kong wika ni Detective Penber at saka sumunod sa akin. I was already comfortable on the passenger seat.

"It's so unfortunate to ruin such a romantic scene. Akala ko ba si Jin Cast ang boyfriend mo?" Mahina niyang komento at saka pinaandar ang

sasakyan. Wala akong panahong pansinin ang mga comments niya. We drove outside Montello High and found a normal and serene diner. I ordered a meal and he had his coffee.

“So, have you found any ideas to save Mirden?” Tanong ko habang hinihintay ang order namin.

“Walang iniwang trace ang abductors,” tipid niyang sagot.

Huminga ako ng malalim. This is getting harder than it already is. Walang way upang malaman kung nasaan si Mirden o kung saan siya dinala ng mga kumuha sa kaniya. Bawat minutong lumilipas ay nalalagay lalo sa matinding panganib ang buhay niya. Nakontak na rin ng school ang mga magulang ni Mirden and they’re planning to fly back here. Alam kong kumikilos na rin ang awtoridad subalit meron silang mga bagay na hindi nila kayang hawakan. At kung tangkain nila ay tiyak na mapapaso sila.

“Paano natin sisimulan ang pagliligtas sa kanya kung hindi natin alam kung ano’ng una nating gagawin?” Frustrated kong tanong. I don’t have patience on small things. Mas lalong wala akong pasensya sa ganitong bagay. I could take risks without even thinking. Kung alam ko nga lang ang saktong kinalalagyan ng Lion’s Den ay baka sumugod na ako doon sa unang segundo pa lang. But knowing that I have this partnership with Detective Penber, baka bigyan niya pa ako ng list ng precautionary measures. I mean, what for? Kahit saang anggulo tingnan, delikado pa rin ito.

“Calm down, Summer. There is a process to these things. No shortcuts. Hindi maganda ang kinalalabasan ng pagmamadali.”

“Baka mamatay si Mirden kung hindi tayo magmamadali!” Natahimik ang detective sa tinuran ko. Naputol ang aming usapan sa pagdating ng inorder namin. Tiningnan ko lang ang mga pagkain nang mailapag ito sa mesa at saka umalis ang waitress.

“This could be out-of-tangent at labag sa prinsipyo ko bilang tagapagpatupad ng batas, subalit dalawang ideya ang naglalaro sa isipan ko,” wika niya sa pagitan ng paghigop ng kape.

“Ano yun?” Buong kyuryosidad kong tanong. Huminga siya nang malalim at saka ipinaliwanag ang umano’y labag sa principles and ethics niyang choices.

“Una, ay pasukin ang Mafia Freniere. Subalit hindi natin dapat sila ipinapasok sa kaso ni Mirden sa kadahilanang idineklara itong isolated case at walang kinalaman sa mafia. Bawal din sa batas ang gumawa nang hakbang lalo’t walang sapat na ebidensya. Ang isiping may koneksyon ang mafia dito ay teorya ko lamang base sa sinabi ni Mirden sa akin tungkol sa mga death threats na natatanggap mo. We could interfere on one of their internal activities and with that, we can trace the abductors,” paliwanag niya.

Napanganga lang ako. Parang gusto kong ilahok sa lugaw ang utak ko. Nahiya naman ako sa naisip niyang ideya. Nakaisip siya ng ideya! That’s the thing! Dangerous but nothing is really safe here! He’s a freaking detective at ngayon ko lang narerealize na hindi siya ordinaryong detective lang. Damn, he’s a smart and fast detective at hindi ako magtataka kung malaman ko mang may award siya sa pagiging detective or something. Now I know why Mirden likes him.

“At ang pangalawa?” Usisa ko.

“Kikilos tayo sa sandaling pagtangkaan nilang muli ang buhay ko. This is really against the law No one should suffer or die… willingly,” seryoso niyang wika. He’s brave, too.

“Well, that’s a brilliant idea. Hihintayin na lang ba nating patayin ka nila at saka ako kikilos?” Babawiin ko si Mirden habang nakapain ang buhay ni Detective Penber.

He frowned at the idea and smiled weakly. “But I should have a big credit here. Mirden might see me as a hero.” Ugh. Naalala ko ang maaaring maramdaman ni Mirden kung sakaling mamatay si Detective Penber dahil sa kaniya. That would be a terrible feeling and I wouldn’t want that to happen to anyone.

“Okay, stop with your Shakespeare’s tragic passion idea. I’ll take the first one. I can do that,” wika ko.

“But Summer, like what I told you, that move is agains the law and against my princinples. Ito nga lang pakikipagtulungan ko sa iyo ay isa nang unethical move.”

“Who cares about the law? F ck your principles.” Finale kong wika.

Huminga siya ng malalim. Wala nang atrasan ito.

[19] Chapter 19: Waging Conflict with the Gods

A/N:

I’ve made myself a bed at the bottom of the blackest hole. And convinced myself that it’s not the reason I don’t see the sun anymore.

So… I can’t say that I’m already fine, but I surely will get better. I was just that lonely that I thought I could die. Anyway, if you do like how Montello High goes, you’re welcome to like the Facebook fan page and join the group. I’m always reading discussions in there.

Fanpage: https://www.facebook.com/MontelloHigh

Song for this chapter:

When It Rains by Paramore

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 19: Waging Conflict with the Gods

I was wandering about how everything would turn out. Will I be able to save this stupid Mirden? Will I be able to save myself? Are we going to make it out alive? Will all our plans work out? This is a suicide subalit handa na akong suungin ang anumang panganib. Rescuing someone in a terrible situation is always a bad idea.

Pangalawang araw simula nang mawala si Mirden. Dumating na rin ang mga magulang nito na kasalukuyang kinakausap si Principal Steins sa office. I was thinking if I will meet them, but I'm not sure how I will be able to explain the situation to them. Binabagtas ko ang corridor patungo sa aking unang klase nang mag-isa. If you're wondering about Jin, I saw Zach drag him earlier. He saw me, too and only offered me a smile. Mukhang desidido ang lider ng Dark Monarch na mawala ang sakit ng ulo niya kay Jin. Maraming estudyante ang nagkumpulan sa isang bahagi ng pasilyo. Lumingon sila sa akin habang palapit ako sa kinaroroonan nila. Walang imik ko lang silang nilagpasan. Agad namang humabol sa akin si Jamie at sinabayan ako sa paglalakad.

"Trinity Domingo is out of the Power 10. She got flushed to 15th place," bungad niya. Binigyan ko siya ng i-don't-care look. The Power 10 is the least of my worries now. "Mirden is 17th which is better kumpara sa dati niyang rank. I'm on the 38th and Van is still the most powerful," patuloy niya.

"Why are you feeding me up with that information?" Matamlay kong tanong.

She smiled weakly at me. "Congratulations. You made it to the 8th place. Ikaw na ngayon ang nag-iisang babaeng nakapasok sa Power 10. You deserve it."

I gave it a thought. Dapat ba akong matuwa? Well, di ba pinlano ko naman na pasukin ang Power 10? Nabigo nga lang akong patalsikin si Van sa puwesto niya. Ipinagkibit-balikat ko na lang ang balita. It seemed unimportant compared to more important things I should be focusing on. If this day is not today, I would have been grinning boastfully to myself and bet to all people in Montello High that it's only a matter of time and I can kick Freniere from the first place. But being the most powerful in this school does not matter to me now. Hindi lumipas ang isang minuto at nakita namin si Tyler. Agad niyang iniwan ang kaniyang mga kaibigan at sumabay sa aming paglalakad.

"Summer, nakita ko sa results ng level exam natin na pasok ka sa Top 10. Wow! But I was actually expecting it," nakangiting wika ni Tyler.

“At nanatili ka pa rin sa ika-siyam na pwesto, right? Galing mo naman,” puri ni Jamie kay Tyler. Yeah, Tyler is one of the Power 10 even before me. Napahinto ako sa paglalakad. Huminto rin sila.

“Summer, what’s wrong?” Tanong ni Jamie. I ignored her and looked at Tyler. He returned it with a puzzled look.

“You’re part of the Power 10… I’m wondering about that,” wika ko.

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin, Summer?” Tanong ni Tyler.

I eyed him levelly. “Hindi naman sa pagmamalaki, but now that I think about it, hindi na siguro ako dapat nagulat na nakapasok ako sa Power 10. Especially, kung base sa criteria ng school na ito. I’m strong, I’m sure you’ve seen that and I’m especially not your ordinary, helpless teenage girl. I’m not stupid and if I put myself into it, I could perfect any exams if I want to. And, hell, my Daddy’s financial network could actually influence a lot in terms of my standing in this school. I know I’m better than our angel-faced President. I could be the most powerful…” I know that I’m blabbering and bragging. Hindi ko lang makontrol ang kayabangan ko, lalo na’t tumatango sila bilang pagsang-ayon sa mga sinasabi ko.

“But you… I don’t get it. What is so special about you? Well, I guess you’re smart. But you don’t look particularly strong either. In fact, you look weak. Kanyang-kaya kitang ipadala sa clinic sa oras ding ito. And you’re only a freshman. So tell me, paano ka nakapasok sa Power 10? Pinerfect mo ang level exam? Saint Attitude? Influence? Money?” Nakatingin lang sa akin si Tyler habang inihahayag ko sa kaniya ang kaniyang mga kakulangan. Kung paanong sa tingin ko ay hindi niya deserve ang kaniyang puwesto. O mas mabuting sabihin na nagdududa ako.

Sumingit si Jamie bilang pag-rescue sa naguguluhang freshman. “I’m sure merong dahilan. You should ask the faculty about that pero huwag mo nang i-harass si Tyler.” I gave her a warning look. Nawiwili na si Jamie na gamitin ang lakas ng loob niya na kontrahin ako.

“Summer, sorry pero hindi ko iyan masasagot,” wika ni Tyler.

Doon ako mas lalong nagduda. “O dahil konektado ka sa Freniere Mafia?” Hindi ko na napigilan ang sarili ko. Isn’t it true? Kilala nga siya ni Algernon. He suddenly looked stressed and troubled. Lumingon siya sa paligid at buong pagmamakaawa akong tiningnan. Fortunately, mangilan-ngilan na lang ang tao sa paligid. Mukhang dumiretso na ang lahat sa kani-kanilang classroom.

“Bakit, Tyler? Takot ka bang may makaalam ng tungkol sa mafia?” Pinanood ko ang reaksyon niya. He might say something… a hint, some clues. Anything that might enlighten me. I don’t suspect him about Mirden but I was wondering…

“Summer, please…” Mukhang tatanggihan niyang muli ang ganitong paksa.

“Tell me, Tyler. What’s your connection to the Mafia? Ano’ng nalalaman mo tungkol sa kanila?” Seryoso kong tanong at mahigpit ko siyang hinawakan sa braso na tila sa pamamagitan noon ay mabibigyan niya ako ng kasagutan.

“Summer, kaibigan natin si Tyler—” Pinutol ko ang sasabihin pa ni Jamie.

“Shut up, Jamie! Wala akong kaibigan! Pero ikaw, kaibigan mo si Tyler. Kaibigan mo rin si Mirden. Naturingan kang kaibigan pero wala ka namang ginagawa! Ano bang kaya mong gawin para sa isang kaibigan? Dahil sa totoo lang, hindi makakatulong ang pamimigay mo ng signatured dresses and bags!”

They looked shocked at what I said, but really, what else is new? I don’t guard my mouth but I was also desperate. Kailangan ko ng impormasyon.

“Sa tingin mo makakatulong kung ipapahamak ko ang sarili ko tulad ng ginagawa mo?” Pumatak na ang luha ni Jamie. Hindi ko siya pinansin at nagfocus kay Tyler.

“Ano’ng tinatago mo, Tyler? Sino ka ba talaga? Dahil nanggigigil ako sa mafiang iyan—” Isang kamay ang humawak sa balikat ko at marahas akong inilayo kay Tyler. Nilingon ko ang mukha ng pakialamero. Hindi na ako nagulat sa palaging pagsulpot ni Van na tila isang kabute.

“Stupid bitch,” mahina nitong wika habang tinitingnan ang namumulang braso ni Tyler. Tiningnan ko siya ng masama. Damn Van Freniere.

“Still protecting your dear Mafia?” Buong pag-uusig kong wika. I don’t know but I feel insulted when he pushed me away to protect Tyler.

“Iyan ba ang pinapagawa sa’yo ni Penber? I’m so disappointed in him,” walang emosyon naman niyang wika subalit kababakasan ng galit ang kaniyang mga mata. Naningkit ang mga mata ko sa inis.

“Bakit ka ba palaging nakiki-alam, Van Freniere?” Galit kong tanong.

“Dahil nababaliw ka na,” tipid niyang sagot.

Mas lalong nag-init ang ulo ko. “I’m not crazy! Damn you!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya na umalingawngaw sa tahimik na pasilyo.

“Wala kang kakayahang iligtas ang mga taong importante sa’yo kung ang tanging kumikilos ay ang iyong emosyon,” mahinahon niyang wika.

Tumawa ako ng pagak. “Sinong nagsabi na importante sa akin si Mirden? Sino’ng nagsabi sa’yo na ililigtas ko siya? You got it all wrong. Hindi ko siya ililigtas. Babawiin ko lang siya!” Galit kong sabi.

“Summer, hindi mo naman kailangang saktan ang mga nasa paligid mo,” wika ni Jamie na nagpapahid ng luha.

“Oh, shut up, crying baby. I didn’t kick someone’s ass here. Not yet.” Binigyan kong muli ng masamang tingin si Van.

“Summer, gusto kitang tulungang bawiin si Mirden. If only I could do something—” Pinutol ni Van ang anupamang sasabihin ni Tyler.

“Stop it, Tyler. Pumunta ka na sa room mo.” Nilingon niya si Jamie. “You, too.”

“D-don’t hurt her,” paki-usap ni Jamie while I just rolled my eyes. Hindi sumagot si Van. Hinila na lang ni Jamie si Tyler sa braso at lumayo sila sa amin. Naiiling na tiningnan ko sila. Kailan pa nausong muli ang mga

alipin? Tumalikod na ako upang tahakin ang daan papuntang klase ko. Hindi pa ako nakakadalawang hakbang ay pinigilan na ako ni Van sa braso. I tried to pull it subalit nang hindi ko magawa ay masama ko na lang siyang tiningnan.

“Let me go, Freniere.” May babala sa boses ko nang sabihin ko iyon sa kaniya. Mukhang hindi siya matitinag at hindi pa rin pinakakawalan ang braso ko.

“Huling beses ko nang sasabihin sa’yo ito, Leondale. Stop what you are doing. Forget about Mirden’s case. Don’t talk to that detective again,” wika ni Van.

“At sinasabi ko rin sa iyo na wala kang karapatang sabihin sa akin kung ano ang mga dapat kong gawin,” sagot ko sa kaniya. Naramdaman kong dumaan ang galit sa kaniyang mga mata. Nagtagis ang kaniyang mga bagang at humigpit ang kapit niya sa braso ko. I put up a blank face but damn! Dapat na niyang alisin sa isip niya na kaya niya akong kontrolin gaya ng mga bagay sa paligid niya. He’s not my lord. I don’t answer to him. Hindi ko pinahalatang nasasaktan ako. But crap! This will surely leave a mark.

“Why do you have to be this hard-headed and tough?! Don’t you realize that you’re being destructively useless?” Hindi ako nagpaapekto sa mga ginamit niyang salita. Iisipin kong hindi siya nag-e-exist. He was just a stranger harassing me with his sharp words.

“I’m hearing nothing. Let me go. Ma-le-late na ako,” sagot ko.

“You f cking need to listen. You have to stop now.” galit niyang wika.

“Listen isn’t in my vocabulary. You are wasting my time! I’m so late!” Bigla niyang akong hinila at binuhat. My stomach landed on his hard shoulder which quickly knock my breath out. I sputtered a curse and he blinked. What the hell---

“Yeah, you’re late.” He never failed to head-blowingly surprise me, and always in a bad way. Tinatahak niya ang daan patungo sa una kong klase.

Hell, I forgot we were classmates in this class. Maingay ang nagsisimula nang klase subalit pagpasok namin ay tila napipi ang lahat. Dumiretso siya sa isang bakanteng silya at pabagsak akong inupo. Damn it! My butt hurts!

“Of course, we’re late. So you better stop whatever stupidity you’re doing at mag-aral ka na lang ng mabuti,” galit pa niyang bulong bago nagtungo sa desk nila ni Makki sa likod.

Ilang tahimik na minuto rin ang lumipas bago nagpatuloy ang klase. Why did he have to make a scene?! It took every ounce of self control I have not to get even right there and then. Buong klase ay pulang-pula ako sa pagpipigil ng galit. What is wrong with that devil?! Bakit ba ayaw niya akong tantanan?! Nang marinig ko ang bell bilang hudyat na tapos na ang period na iyon ay agad akong tumayo at inunahan ang teacher sa paglabas. The hell with this day! Gusto kong tapusin ang lahat ng may buhay na humaharang sa dinaraanan ko. Destructively useless?! How dare he say that! He should have met me two years ago, he’ll even be surprised I’m exerting such an effort to save Mirden. Crap! I don’t even understand why the hell I should save her! Nauubos na ang pasensya ko sa mga abductors niya. Ang tanging bagay na kumukumbinsi sa akin na buhay pa siya ay dahil wala pang bangkay na nakikita. Another thing is, and Detective Penber also thought of this, why are they keeping her alive? I don’t like the idea of her being dead but what do they need from her?

Detective Penber and I had already organized a plan. But it is not a flawless one. Unang-unang butas dito ay ang hindi nito pagiging legal. According to him, it’s against the law and his principles. But it’s all we’ve got. And then I remembered accusing him of carelessly including Mirden on Novou’s case. But here I am, another minor willingly participating on a dangerous rescue mission.

Our plan is like doing a deadly stunt without any protection gears. Detective Penber is doing his best to track some Freniere Mafia’s activities. Subalit mahirap hanapan ng butas ang mafia na organisado at pinapalakad ng makapangyarihan at halos perpektong mga tao. Iniisip ko pa lang na sasalungatin ko sila ay tila nanghihina na ang tuhod ko. What if hindi makakuha si Detective Penber ng impormasyon? Well, there’s plan B. But we will have to put the detective’s life on the line. Yun ay kung mayroon pa

kaming buhay na itataya. Dahil siguradong tapos kami kapag kinompronta kami ng mafia. Thinking of the wise, well-mannered and seeming-to-know-a-lot Algernon Freniere is like thinking of a powerful, classic gentlemen who could manipulate the world on his palm. Damn! Baka nga sa sobrang karunungan niya ay alam na niya ang plano namin.

And then there was this satanic and rogue Sebastian Freniere. It would surely be like facing a barbaric Lord who would kill a whole tribe just for fun. We won't be able to get close to him and make it out alive for less than one minute. In fact, I never wanted to see Tres again. And how I survived everyday facing the mysterious, dangerous and control-freak Giovanni Freniere is out of my mental ability to explain. He's a sleeping ancient monster! A devil on the blackest hole. I'm sure he could ruin the world. Going against the Frenieres is like waging war against the gods.

Lumilipad pa rin ang utak ko hanggang sa matapos ang lahat ng pang-umaga kong klase. It's a good thing na hindi na nagcross ang landas namin ni Van. I heard that he went out of Montello with Tyler to who knows where. I never got an answer from Tyler. Huminga ako ng malalim bago pumasok sa cafeteria. Matapos maimbestigahan at maayos ang lugar ay binuksan nang muli ito. Hindi ko makita si Jamie sa mga taong naroroon o maski si Jin but I could have lunch by myself. Jamie is still probably in our room, shedding more tears on her already wet pillows. Kailan ba niya marerealize na walang magagawa ang pag-iyak? Dumiretso ako sa counter and got a blueberry cheesecake and beef asian bowl. If I'll be doing deadly adventures, I'll be needing more energy. Nasa kalahati pa lang ako ng pagkain nang may biglang umupo sa bakanteng silya sa aking harap. Nag-angat ako ng paningin at tila naging mapait ang kinakain ko nang mapagsino. Parang gusto kong itapon sa mukha niya ang lahat ng nasa mesa.

"So, tell me. Where's the celebration for getting the 8th place? Ito na ba yun? It's cheaper than I expected." Buong tamis na wika ni Trinity. Hindi ako sumagot at itinuloy lang ang pagkain. "Masaya ka na? It must have been a huge effort para i-manipula ang level exam. You must be really rejoicing," patuloy niya.

“Your heart is bleeding and that calls for a celebration,” sagot ko at saka muling sumubo. Her smile didn’t falter.

“You’re on your way to stealing everything from me, huh? Maaaring nakuha mo ang place sa Power 10 pero hanggang doon na lang yun. Hindi kita hahayaang makuha ang lahat.” She was still smiling.

But she’s actually not my concern. I don’t know how her lunatic mind works. I grinned at her evilly. “You’re stupid. Can’t accept the reality that you’ve already lost against me?” Wika ko na ikinawala ng nakakairita niyang pekeng ngiti. Hindi ko na inalis ang nang-iinsulto kong ngisi sa aking mga labi. It seemed to drive her madly crazy. Naningkit ang kaniyang mga mata.

“Kung ano man ang binabalak mo, hindi kita hahayaang magtagumpay. Simula nang dumating ka rito, nagkagulo na ang lahat. First was Novou’s death. Then Mirden got kidnapped. Nawala na ang kapayapaan sa school nang dahil sa iyo! They doubted my skills in governing the school as the Student Council President. It affected my rank!” Bumakas na sa kaniyang mukha at tono ang matinding galit. Iniisip niya pa lang kasalanan ko ang lahat. I didn’t do anything on Novou even if I’d been on the Nightwoods that night of the fire. Naisip ko nang baka may koneksyon yun sa punishment ni Novou for failing to kill Van. In Mirden’s case… was it really my fault? Hindi ko ipinakitang naaapektuhan ako ng mga sinasabi niya. Sa halip ay kinuha ko ang drinks ko at uminom.

“Is that how losers like you cope up? Hindi mo talaga marealize that I’m better than you, huh? I deserve to be on the Power 10 because I am stronger than you. I’m even smart enough to defeat you. You’re beautiful face won’t do you any better.” I smirked at her as I saw anger in her eyes. Tama lang sa kaniya ito. I’m getting even.

“Bitch! Ingatan mo ang mga binibitawan mong salita sa akin. I’m still the President of Montello High’s Student Council. You should show me respect!” Namumula niyang wika. Nakuha na namin ang atensyon ng mga nasa cafeteria.

“It’s not the title that demands respect. It’s mainly the attitude of the person with that title and you’re acting like a typical high school bitch.” Her mouth gaped at my words. Mukhang hindi siya sanay na sinasabihan siya ng ganun. Tumayo ako at tinapunan siya ng huling tingin. “You should’ve chosen the right person to dues with. Do you know what made you a loser? Because we’re not even on the same category. Our match is an imbalance. Iniisip mo pa lang na kalabanin ako, talo ka na.”

She frowned in disapproval. “Ano’ng pinagsasabi mo?” Tanong niya.

Seryoso ko siyang tiningnan sa mata. “You’re pretty. You’re smart. You’re good, for an ordinary person. But the only reason you lost is because I was the opponent. Can’t you see? There isn’t really any competition between us.” Tila nawala ang dugo sa kaniyang mukha nang sabihin ko ang mga iyon. I always had a way on intimidating someone in a way that would make them scared of me. Good thing that Trinity was actually affected like this. Iniwan ko na siya on her shocked state. I was just so tired of dealing with her and her pointless antics. Sa lahat ng nangyari sa araw na ito, ang tungkol sa kaniya ang pinaka-nonsense.

But then, was it really my fault? Aware naman ako na palagi akong lumilikha ng gulo. But I never planned on creating a chaos like this. Or is it all planned? Ang Montello High? Ang mga gangsters? Ang mafia? Paanong umiikot ang mundo ko sa mga ganitong bagay sa maikling panahon lang? Kung kasalanan ko ang lahat, para ko na ring pinatay si Andrew Novou. If it was really my fault hen ako ang nagdala kay Mirden sa kapahamakan. Natigil ako sa pag-iisip nang makita kong lumabas si Detective Penber sa Montello main building. He was really full of surprises. Hindi ba siya nagpapahinga? Araw-araw siyang nasa Montello High. Is he geniunely serious on saving Mirden?

“Detective Penber,” bungad ko sa kaniya nang makalapit ako. He was so serious when he looked at me. There’s this grave spark in his eyes that made my heart beat faster in fear. Is he going to give me a bad news? I braced myself on what he’s about to say.

“Summer, meron ka bang oras para makipag-usap sa akin?” Tanong niya.

Crap, this is really serious.

“I don’t have time. Time doesn’t really exist for me so I don’t mind.” Well, that’s partly true. For normal reasons and not so ordinary ones.

“Good, for I will show you how important time is. Especially when we’re slowly losing it in our hands,” wika niya at iginiya niya ako patungong parking lot. We drove outside Montello High. I ducked my head to avoid any questions from the guards on the school gate. Huminto kami sa isang coffee shop and I ordered some iced coffee. Uh. I know how weird it is to have coffee sa kalagitnaan ng araw. But Detective Penber is weirder for he’s having hot, brewed coffee. Really, these are terrible cups for my tensions.

“Are you gonna tell me to give up and wear my black dress because Mirden’s body was found?” Diretsa kong tanong.

He turned to me with a cold gaze. “No,” sagot niya.

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least the worst is out. “So are you going to encourage me on guessing? ‘Cause I won’t,” wika ko.

Huminga siya ng malalim and looked at me. “I found a little passageway. Isang transaction ng Freniere Mafia ang tila hindi well-planned. It’s not even organized. Normally, hindi iyon pinapatos ng mga Freniere subalit malaking pera ang pinag-uusapan dito. Wala akong impormasyon tungkol sa organisasyong ka-trnasaksyon ng Freniere Mafia. Subalit isang bagay ang tiyak ko: they’re information maniacs. They’re also experts on the assasination business.”

Nakatingin lang ako sa kaniya habang inaabsorb ang mga impormasyon. Sa madaling sabi ay tila sasali kami sa laro ng mga higante.

“Base sa analisasyon ko, gusto ng grupong ito na lagpasan ang mga Freniere pagdating sa field ng mga illegal business and underground transactions. Subalit masyadong concealed ang Freniere Mafia. Ni walang nakaka-alam kung sino ang boss ng mafia kung sino-sino pa ang tao sa likod nito. Kahit ko, guts lang ang basehan ko tungkol sa koneksyon ni Van

Freniere sa mafia. Kahit anong imbestigasyon ang gawin ko, lumalabas na isa lang siyang ordinaryong estudyante.”

Napalunok ako. Damn that Mafia. At mukhang mas marami pa akong alam tungkol sa mga Freniere kumpara sa mga pulis. I’ve already met Sebastian and Algernon Freniere. Iyon ba ang purpose ng unang black box na may mensaheng, ‘You know too much. You might as well be dead?’ Posible bang ang pagkakaalam ko sa mga impormasyong iyon ang tinutukoy nila? Freniere mafia and that mysterios organization had every purpose of killing me.

“So that organization took a risk and decided to do a deal with huge money on it with the Freniere Mafia. At hindi iyon mapapalagpas ni Tres. That rogue and violent monster. Siya lang ang hindi nag-aabalang itago ang sarili bilang isa sa mga nagpapalakad ng mafia. At kahit ganun man, walang nagtatangkang sumalungat sa kaniya. Dahil hindi mo mamamalayang nabawian ka na pala ng buhay. Ibang klase siyang kumilos. Kaya ka niyang tapusin sa pinakamabilis o pinakamabagal na paraan. He had lust for power, money and gorgeous ladies.” I flinched habang umiiling na sinabi iyon ni Detective Penber. Describing Tres is just to terrible. But experiencing that was way worse. It was tragic.

“So magkakaroon sila ng transaction?” Tanong ko sa isang obvious na kaalaman. The detective didn’t mind my dumbassness.

“Oo. And trace the organization. On my calculation, 60% ang posibilidad na nasa kanila si Mirden. They could also be the one giving you those death threats. Or it could also be the mafia. They might be keeping her alive dahil nalaman nilang kaibigan mo siya. They could be torturing her to say something. Or keep her until you say something,” sagot niya.

Natahimik ako. “Kailan mo nalaman ang mga impormasyong ito?”

“Kanina lang, bago kita nakasalubong.”

Damn. His detective skills were amazing. Umandar agad lahat ng posibilidad at kalkulasyon na iyon sa isip niya? “So, have you investigated their purpose for assasinating you?” Tanong ko.

Umiling siya. “It might be because I’m investigating them. Pero wala pa akong hawak na konkretong impormasyon tungkol sa kanila para maisipan nilang ipapatay ako. Unfortunately, it’s still hard to find out the reasons why I should be dead. It’s like finding proofs that I actually exist. Kahit gaano ka man katapang, naiisip mo ba kung paano ka malalagutan ng hininga?”

I shuddered at the thought. Of all people, I think I could be the one who’ll understand him in this category. Threats, lives on line. Bago lang akong nakatanggap ng threats pero siya, mula nang pasukin niya ang trabahong ito, nasa panganib na lagi ang buhay niya.

“So, what are we gonna do with this information?” Tanong ko.

“It’s still actually 10% facts and 90% hypothesus based on a 10% information. And there’s only one way to test if we’re on the right track. That is to meet them.” I could almost taste the itch for some actions in his voice and the game on my response.

“How are we gonna do that?” Tanong ko.

“Let’s pray for God to be on our side,” seryoso niyang sagot.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Seriously, Detective.”

“We will attend a masquerade ball. That’s where they’re going to make the transaction,” sagot niya. Masquerade. Masks. Tuxedos.

“And when is that?”

“Tonight.” I gasped. Suddenly, nabalutan ako ng sense of time. Ganun kabilis? Konti lang ang time for preparation?

“And what are we gonna do now? Paano tayo maghahanda?” Nate-tense kong tanong.

“We will pray,” sagot niya at saka ipinakita ang silver cross pendant ng kaniyang kwintas. This jerk. I’ve never pegged him to be religious.

“Uh, seriously?” Muli kong tanong.

“Seriously,” he answered.

[20] Chapter 20: The Masquerade

Author’s Note:

Here goes something. Haha. Just so you know people, you’re not the only one who’s suffering whenever I wasn’t able to write and update. I always have this oh-so-busy schedule and really, I would prefer writing than confronting other things. Writing, to me, is like making peace with my soul. I’m always on such a chaos whenever I wasn’t able to get up in the middle of the night and write the things that are playing on my head. That’s quite an agony, don’t you think? And that’s for my late updates. I’m not explaining (I don’t do that!) haha, I was just trying to make sense. So I hope that my point’s taken.

But anyway, I’m giving up on the VIP tickets! Nakakainggit sa mga aattend ng concert! haha. And whoah, who’ll be attending Cosplaymania at Mall of Asia on 30/Sunday? Let’s see each other in there! You might have a chance on meeting my inspiration for Makki Sison’s character! And yeah, let me know your thoughts about Montello High on our Book Like Page and Groups. On normal days, I’m really not active on posting things, but I follow all the interactions and discussions in there! haha. I’m stalking my pages.

And for this ‘The Masquerade’, I’m actually indebted to a particular song. It’s ‘Look After You’ by The Fray. The song’s great. It’s actually playing on my head until I finished the chapter… Gonna shut up now. Enjoy reading!

Editor’s Note: Sa mga active sa fb fanpage, joke lang ang pag-a-out-of-town ko. Tapos na ang agony. Ito na ang 20th. Enjoy!

Siel Alstreim

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Chapter 20: The Masquerade

My mind was completely disorganized but I was determined. I didn't have the slightest idea of what will happen next. All I know was that there's something that needs to be done. And that's why I'm on this mission with Detective Penber.

I was playing with my cold white fingers while on the Mustang's passenger seat while the Detective was driving the car. Hindi maipagkakailang malakas ang dating ng Detective on his classic gray suit na tinernuhan ng black mask with gold swirls on the side. Mukha siyang isang royal dignitary na dadalo sa isang engrandeng kasiyahan.

"You look beautiful," komento niya nang lingunin ako sa hindi mapalagay na posisyon. I had to give him credit for my outfit on this dangerous mission. He gave me this elegant, strapless royal blue gown that softly kisses the floor. The fine silky satin dress had exposed half of my back and gently hugged my waist and emphasized the firmness of my breasts. There were also victorian swirls down the length of the dress. Silver sequins and pretty stones had been embroidered on strategic places, making it an outstanding ball gown. To match the dress, I had a silver mask with swirls of blue sapphires carefully hiding half of my face, only giving away my brown eyes and my red lips.

It was Jamie who got through the trouble of putting make up on me when I told her that I'll be attending some Masquerade Party. My brown hair was up giving emphasis to my slender neck. And as the theme sets, I wore a silver three-inched shoes. I could be mistaken as a classic young lady. But the title 'lady' won't really be appropriate on my personality. I was wondering why do I have to appear this elegant but the detective told me that it's part of our mission. It is about espionage. And I know better than to doubt him.

"I think I am a stranger," wika ko.

“Confidence, Summer. That’s your most important accessory tonight,” wika niya. Hindi na ako sumagot. He already discussed our plan. I just had to stick with it and everything will go well. Hopefully, it will. Tumigil ang Mustang ilang metro ang layo mula sa engrandeng hotel. Tumingala ako upang alamin kung gaano katayog ang gusali. Sumakit ang leeg ko. Halatang mga taong bigatin sa buhay ang tumatapak dito. Kelan ko ba in-underestimate ang Freniere Mafia when it comes on their financial abilities? Bumaba si Detective Penber at ipinagbukas ako ng pinto.

“Bakit hindi tayo sa entrance tumigil?” Tanong ko sa kanya as I glanced to the awesome cars being left to the valet by its bigtime owners.

“The easier escape would be far from the entrance,” sagot niya. Oh hell, yeah. We were not here to enjoy the party. We were here to lure the giants. To feed ourselves to the monsters. How sweet.

I walked on my heels with as much confidence as I can. Naka-alalay naman sa akin si Detective Penber. Then we finally entered the Masquerade Party. Saying that it’s grand would be an understatement. The Masquerade Party is so magical, enticing, bewitching. I couldn’t even grasp the exact term to define it. It must be out of this world. Meron siyang taste of modern and touch of vintage. Marami na ring tao on their best gown and tuxedo outfit. And why not? The ball was held for the opening of a perfume company: “Stones and Masks.” It’s quite earthy. Halos lahat ng prominenteng tao at possible investors ay narito. And of course, the Frenieres and whoever they are dealing with would also be present here. Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng mga strings ang kinailangang i-pull out ni Detective Penber upang magkaroon kami ng invitation for this party.

Isang tao kaagad ang hinanap ng aking paningin. Paano ko nga ba siya makikita on this sea of masked faces? But when you hate a person, you’ll be hating him even if you are not seeing his face. So what more if he’s just within the proximity? I trusted my guts na makikita ko siya. He’s our only visible lead. At isa pa, Tres is not just part of a sea of faces. He must be easy to recognized.

“Sikapin mong huwag mawala sa tabi ko. Masyadong delikado,” bulong ng Detective.

“We must separate kung gusto nating maging madali ang lahat. I’ll be looking for Tres, and you’ll check the room on 7th floor. You said that a meeting will be set in there, right?” Mahina kong sagot.

Sandaling nag-isip ang detective at saka bumuntong-hininga. “Okay, I’ll check things sa itaas. Don’t make any unplanned moves while you’re here. Pag nakita mo si Tres, send me a message. Pupuntahan kaagad kita.”

“Pag nakita mong may meeting sa taas at naroon ang mga pakay natin, kailangan mo akong sabihan. Stick with the plan,” wika ko. Nararamdaman ko kasing medyo nag-aalinlangan pa rin si Detective Penber sa partisipasyon ko sa misyong ito.

“If something happened… tumawag ka sa headquarters.” That would be the last resort. At gagawin lang namin yun kung wala nang ibang pagpipilian. Ibig sabihin, isa sa amin ang maaaring mapahamak kaya hihingi na kami ng tulong sa otoridad.

Tumango ako. Hinawakan niya muna ako sa balikat at saka siya umalis. Now, here goes all or nothing. Isang waiter ang dumaan na may dalang glasses of wine and champagne. He offered me one and I gladly received it. I have to play the role of a guest enjoying the party. I took a sip and eyed my surroundings carefully. This was like being in a fairytale with a Mission Impossible situation. I searched for the faintest hint of that person.

Napako ang atensyon ko sa taong papasok ng entrance. Naka-suot siya ng itim na American coat with a red, silk tie. He looked as if he came here for business and not for the party. Suot niya rin ang isang kulay itim na maskara na tila may mga opal designs. His long, shoulder-length hair looked soft despite being brushed fashionably. Kung bakit nakuha niya ang atensyon ko ay dahil iyon sa matalim na tinging naglalaro sa mga mata niya bagama’t mukha naman iyong nakangiti. Ang perfect structure ng matangos niyang ilong at ang tila nakamamatay na aura. And crap! Agad na uminit ang ulo ko.

He must be the rogue monster- Sebastian Freniere. Dalawang matatangkad, sexy at eleganteng mga babae ang lumapit sa kanya at humawak sa kanyang mga bisig. Agad niyang kinabig ang isa at hinalikan sa mga labi.

Nagdisperse naman ang mga naka-tuxedo rin niyang mga tauhan habang lumalalim ang pakikipaghalikan ng kanilang amo. That confirmed my intuition. Sebastian Freniere it is. A demon for sexy and gorgeous ladies. I rolled my eyes nang pakawalan niya ang tila stunned na unang babae at kabigin palapit ang pangalawa. What a damn jerk! I sipped again on my champagne.

Tahimik akong sumunod nang makita kong naglakad patungo sa kabilang bahagi si Tres. Hindi siya puwedeng mawala sa aking paningin. Nagsimulang tumugtog ang bandang tila ilang balde ng ginto ang ibinayad. They were definitely doing good on their job. Nahawi na rin ang mga tao sa dance floor at napalitan ng magkaparehang sumasayaw. Napalingon ako roon. Masyadong maganda ang senaryo upang balewalain. Subalit nang ibalik ko ang aking atensyon sa aking sinusundan ay hindi ko na siya makita.

“Shit!” I cursed. Nagmamadali akong naglakad patungo sa direksyong huli kong kinakitaan kay Tres at saka tumigil at luminga sa paligid. Parang gusto kong saktan ang sarili ko dahil sa katangahang nagawa ko. Paano ko nahayaang mawala siya sa aking paningin?

Isang matipunong braso ang humapit sa aking beywang at nakulong ako sa bisig ng isang nilalang. I tensed. Shit! Tumingala ako at nagtama ang mga mata namin ng taong hinahanap ko. It sent shivers to my spine. That deadly stare.

“I can feel when people are watching me, or following me. Usually, I kill them in just few seconds. You should be thankful for being completely gorgeous. It would be a shame to waste a pretty, little thing like you,” wika niya with a smirk.

“I--- I am not after y-you,” nauutal kong depensa. Para akong nasukol ng leon sa kanyang trap. I couldn’t move. Nakakaramdam ako ng takot tuwing nagtatama ang aming paningin. I know that in just one wrong move, he will be able to slit my throat. Halos naririnig ko ang kaba sa dibdib ko.

“Oh, of course. Maybe, I could offer you a last dance of death. Don’t worry, my princess. It will be sweet. Bloody sweet.” At iginiya niya ako patungo

sa kanina lang ay pinagmamasdan kong dance floor. Maya-maya pa ay sumasayaw na rin kami tulad ng ibang magkapareha.

“Hindi mo ako puwedeng patayin sa harap ng madaming tao, Sebastian Freniere,” walang alinlangan kong wika. Gusto kong sabitan ng medalya ang sarili ko dahil hindi man lang kababakasan ng takot ang boses ko. Damn! I’m stirring inside!

Tumawa si Sebastian. “Kayang-kaya kitang iwan ritong nakahandusay at wala nang buhay bago pa matapos ang musika,” nakangiti niyang sagot. Siyempre, alam kong kaya niya iyong totohanin.

“I don’t wanna dance now,” wika ko at pinilit kong sumalungat sa mosyon. Subalit tila balewala ang ginawa ko dahil nagawa niya pa ring isayaw ang katawan namin. He’s holding me so close… in a harsh way. His grip was so tight that it could crush my bones. I gritted my teeth to fight the pain away.

“You don’t really have a choice, Sweetie. So tell me, bakit mo ako sinusundan?” Tanong niya.

“I told you. I’m a guest here. Nakita lang kita kanina and I was just trying to confirm if it’s really you, jerk!” Naiinis kong wika. Inilapit niya ang mga labi niya sa tainga ko.

“Careful with words, converse girl. Hawak ko ang walang kuwenta mong buhay,” bulong niya na nagpalamig sa lahat ng mga daliri ko. Paano siya nakakapag-impose ng ganung fear sa akin? Oh, right. Dahil hindi siya nag-aalangang kumitil ng buhay.

“But it’s the truth!” Wika ko.

He’s still smirking. “Let’s see. I have always wanted to kill you, Sweetie. But since you looked so gorgeous for the night, I think I’ll keep you alive---for few hours. Pero sa ngayon, bibigyan ko muna ng heart attack ang mahal kong kapatid,” wika niya at inilabas ang cellphone. Tiningnan ko lang siya habang pinipindot ang keypad sa aparato at inilapit sa iyon tainga niya.

“I’m enjoying the night. With a gorgeous girl whom I did not expect to dance with,” he said with a devilish smile spreading on his face. “Oops! If I were you, I will not end the call so soon so that you won’t missed hearing her lovely voice. Who knows, this could be the last time that you’ll be able to talk to her,” tila pigil nito sa akmang pagtapos ng tawag ng kausap niya sa kabilang linya. Hindi pa rin nabubura ang nakakaasar na ngiti sa kanyang mga labi nang ilapit niya sa tainga ko ang cellphone. Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng binabalak niya kaya buong pagmamatigas akong hindi nagsalita.

“Oh, still tough?” Komento niya. Marahas niyang iginuhit ang kuko niya sa aking leeg. I flinched as I felt the sudden pain of a small cut that formed on my neck. Umiling-iling siya nang hindi ako gumawa ng kahit na anong ingay mula sa maliit na sugat na iyon. Nang maisip niyang hindi ko ipagkakanulo ang sarili ko, gumapang ang isang kamay niya mula sa aking bewang at tinutunton ang direksyon sa aking dibdib. I inhaled sharply and panicked.

“Don’t you dare! Don’t touch me jerk!” Naiinis kong wika. I heard a sudden sound, almost static, from the phone. Ibinalik niya ang kamay niya sa aking bewang at ang cellphone sa kanyang tainga.

“She’s really something,” wika niya muli sa kabilang linya. Tiningnan ko siya ng pinakamaruming tingin na maipupukol ko. Napawi ang ngiti niya nang sumagot ang kausap. Tinapunan niya ako ng masamang tingin bago sumagot. “You can’t do that, Van,” seryoso niyang wika. Mas lumakas ang pagtahip sa dibdib ko nang marinig ang pangalang binanggit niya. I now know it was him on the other line, and he doubled all my tensions.

“Fine, She’ll go home unscathed,” muling wika ni Sebastian at saka tinapos ang tawag. Hinarap niya ako. Tumigil na rin ang aming paggalaw. “You’re lucky, and well, gorgeous. At dahil doon kaya mapapahaba pa ang buhay mo. I am the f cking Death personified! At hindi ako makapaniwalang mapipilitan akong huwag kang patayin. The party’s over now for you. Go home,” wika ni Sebastian at walang lingon-likod na iniwan ako sa gitna ng mga nagsasayawang magkakapareha.

Ilang segundo akong napatanga sa direksyong tinunguhan niya subalit agad rin akong napabalik sa reyalidad nang mawala siya sa aking paningin.

Naramdaman ko ang pagvibrate ng cellphone ko mula sa maliit na clutch bag. Agad ko iyong kinuha at binuksan ang dumating na mensahe:

SENDER: Det. Patrick Penber

MESSAGE: Walang meeting sa 7th floor. It's a trick! Inform me if you've seen Tres. I'm on my way down.

Crap! Agad kong itinago ang cellphone sa bag at patakbong tinungo ang direksyong pinaglahuan ni Sebastian. He's the only lead. Walang nakuhang clue mula sa 7th floor na supposedly venue ng pagpupulong ng wala pang pangalang organisasyon. Ano'ng ibig niyang sabihing 'It's a trick?' Uh. Lumingun-lingon ako sa bawat parte ng lugar sa pag-asang makikita si Sebastian Freniere. I couldn't afford to lose that monster!

Nahagip ng paningin ko ang pagpasok ng mga naka-tuxedong lalaki na pare-parehong may puting mask sa elevator. Those were Tres' bodyguards. Nagmamadali kong tinungo ang elevator ang tiningnan kung saan ito hihinto. It's going down. Pinindot ko ang down button ng katabing elevator at agad na pumasok nang makita kong huminto ang elevator na sinakyan nina Tres sa parking lot.

Tila kay bigat ng bawat segundong lumilipas habang nakakulong ako sa apat na sulok ng elevator. I held my breath as it stopped on the parking lot. Iniisip ko nang merong mga nakatutok na baril sa akin sa pagbukas pa lang ng elevator. It opened. I breathed out. No one was there. May narinig akong mangilan-ngilang mga boses at tahimik ko iyong sinundan. I tried to be careful not to make any noise, or else, I would end up dead. On the spot.

Agad akong nagtago nang makita ko ang grupo ni Tres katapat ang grupo ng mga taong naka-tuxedo rin at maskara. Their aura seemed familiar. I remembered that night when a fire alarmed Montello High… and that day when Mirden was abducted. Mas lumala ang kaba sa dibdib ko. It must be them… They were the---

Isang matibay na kamay ang humawak sa braso ko. Umandar ang instinct ko and my self-defense kicked in. Pumihit patalikod ang braso ko at naramdaman ko ang pagtama ng siko ko sa ilong ng taong iyon.

“F ck! Bitch!” Mura ng lalaki na hindi pa rin binibitawan ang braso ko. Tiningnan ko siya. He’s from the organization! I’m so dead! Subalit hindi ako mamamatay nang hindi lumalaban. I won’t give him the pleasure of killing me helplessly. Inilagay ko ang puwersa sa aking kanang paa at buong lakas siyang bingyan ng high kick. Nakita ko sa paggusot ng ng kalahati ng kanyang mukha na nasaktan siya. Subalit matigas ang isang ito. Hindi pa rin niya ako binibitawan. I prepared myself on giving a punch pero isang malakas na sampal ang tumama sa aking kaliwang pisngi. Naramdaman ko pa ang kirot sa aking mga labi bago ko mahigit ang paghinga ko dahil sa isang malakas na suntok sa aking sikmura.

“Filthy bitch!” Wika nitong muli at binuhat ako sa aking tiyan at inilapit sa kanyang tagiliran. Ngayon ko lang napansin na malaking tao pala ang nakalaban ko. Jeez! Para lang akong kuting na dala-dala niya palapit sa nag-uusap na grupo. Nakita kong napatingin sa amin ang lahat. Bakas naman ang bahagyang pagkagulat ni Tres.

“I should have known that she’s stupid.” Narinig kong wika niya.

“Kasama mo siya?” Tanong ng tila umaaktong pinuno ng kabilang grupo.

“Just one of those pretty, masked faces,” sagot ni Tres. Parang gusto ko siyang gilitan ng leeg.

Dumating ang isa pang lalaking nakamaskara at lumapit sa umaaktong pinuno. Meron itong ibinulong at saka natuon sa akin ang mga tingin nila.

“Kalimutan na natin ang mga walang kuwentang bagay. So, where are the drugs that would give me billions of dollars? Interesado rin ako sa inyong proposal,” wika ni Tres.

Crap! Masasaksihan ko ba ang isang actual illegal transaction? Isa lang ang ibig sabihin nito, hindi na nila ako hahayaang mabuhay pa. I was so stupid! I should have informed Detective Penber first at humingi ng back up bago ko sinundan si Sebastian. Heto na naman ako sa pagkilos nang hindi nag-iisip. I am so brash!

Naglabas ng isang attache case ang isang miyembro ng organisasyon. Kinuha naman iyon ng umaaktong pinuno. “The drugs that I’m gonna show you is considered as the most effective, most expensive, and powerful project of our organization. You can use it for pleasure of forgetting, escaping, imagining and for killing. Hindi lang ito combination ng chemicals, ginamit rin namin ang teknolohiya sa proyektong ito.”

Binuksan niya ang attache case at naglabas ng isang sealed na tube na naglalaman ng kulay asul na malapot na likido. It is like the color of sapphires with sparks of diamonds. Napakaganda niyang pagmasdan. Ni hindi ko mai-alis ang paningin ko mula rito.

“This is carefully and geniously created. Isang tube nito ay maaari kang kumita ng dalawang milyon at kalahating dolyar. Mula rito, puwede ko nang gawing human tester ng produkto ang lahat ng tao sa Masquerade Party. You can create thousands of drug candies out of this and sell it in unreasonable, expensive rate. You can also control people’s mind with this if you want to.”

“Control everyone’s mind?” Wika ni Tres. Ugh! He really had a lust for power and money.

“Yes. That’s were we use technology. We have a system that could give you a control over the drugged person subalit nagva-vary iyon sa proximity. We’re getting success here. At kapag nagtuloy-tuloy pa ito--- which we will for sure--- babasagin namin ang limitasyong iyon at kokontrolin ang mga tao regardless of their distance,” seryosong sagot ng pinuno ng organisasyon. Hell, mukhang hindi iyon magandang pangitain. These people! What are they thinking? What are they planning to do? That’s definitely a scenario at the worst case! It’s too inhuman to think!

“How am I gonna control people with this?” Tanong muli ni Tres. Mukhang fascinated siya sa ideya ng pagkontrol ng mga tao.

“You’ll be needing this.” At naglabas ng isang smartphone ang nakamaskarang nagdidiscuss ng tungkol sa drugs.

Nagpakawala ng nakakalokong tawa si Tres. He seemed amazed and interested. “Then I can use my I-phone in this? What? Sponsored ba ang project na ito ng Apple, Inc? ng Samsung?” I rolled my eyes at him. Paano pa niya nagagawang maglabas ng ganitong komento? Gumanti rin ng nakakainis na ngiti ang nasa kabilang grupo. There’s something in his smile. Something that shouts dangerous.

“Your Iphone5 would be useless if the system was not installed. On this system, it’s like you’re having a Global Positioning System application, but it’s more complicated. You’ll be locating here not just the place and establishments, but also people. We called it EOL system. Same as it’s EOS project,” paliwanang ng estranghero.

Tumangu-tango si Tres. “And how could it give those pleasures?” Tanong nito. For sure, he’ll be having the pleasure of controlling people. And of killing people, too.

“Unlike ordinary drugs, it could give you more actions, more emotions and more vivid pictures. Kapag tinake mo ito, you can think first of whatever you want, sleeping on the sea of money, being the most powerful character on your favorite online games, or having a hot, wild sex with Megan Fox or even with this girl with us, if that would be of your choice,” wika nito at tinapunan ako ng tingin. Uh, bibit pa rin ako ng maskuladong mama. Sinalubong ko siya ng matalim kong mga mata.

Tres snickered. “The last one sounds great and tempting,” sagot nito. “It’s like you’re on a dream state but it would really feels like reality,” nakangisi nitong dagdag. “EOL... I like this one. You must have all the experts for this project. What’s the drugs, anyway?” Tanong ni Tres.

“Elixir of Life. Yes, we have all the chemists and experts on this field. It what makes us the best,” nakangisi nitong wika.

“Oh, for sure you’ve got all the death threats and bribery to get the best people. That’s how the business works,” wika ni Tres. Tumango ang umaaktong pinuno at saka ibinalik ang tube. Kumpara sa iba, mas konti ang laman nito. Well, mukhang pang-demonstration ang isang ito. Mukha ring

napansin iyon ni Tres. With his sharp eyes, siguradong alam niya kung saang parte siya lugi. He could be a businessman, if he wasn't such a rogue.

"Okay, I'll be making a deal now. But I have to make that one tube filled. Base sa paliwanag mo, mukhang ilang daang libo ang lugi ko sa isang iyan," wika niya.

Mas lumuwang ang ngiti ng nasa kabilang organisasyon. "There's no need. It's for demonstration," sagot ng estranghero.

"I don't think so. Everything should be full." Sebastian flashed a dangerous look.

"You don't get it, do you? It's been a part of the demonstration," sagot muli. Mukhang nauubusan na ng pasensya si Tres. Magkakaroon ata ng problema sa transaksyon.

"We didn't use anything!" Tila napipi ako sa kinasasadlakan ng sitwasyon. Mas pinili kong manahimik. Tumawa nang malakas ang kausap ni Tres.

"We did." And touched his smartphone.

It's like a bat of lashes. Masyadong mabilis. Lahat ng tauhan ni Tres ay naglabas ng baril at itinutok sa pinuno nila. Tres also had his gun pointed on the acting leader of the opposite organization. Hindi niya inaasahan ang pagbaliktad ng mga tauhan. What's happening? I looked at the faces of the Freniere's men. Their eyes were blank.

"They are now zombies. Frankensteins. That's the term for those people who are drugged. And yes, we used it on them. We just activated it now. See my controls on them? Brilliant, right? They shouldn't have taken the wines."

This drug was on the wines served on the party?! Am I drugged, too? Nakaramdam ako ng kaba sa sitwasyon ni Tres. I don't like him. But he's on that situation wherein he's alone.

“It’s a checkmate, Tres. You were drugged, too. We needed some files from the Freniere Mafia. I’m sure your boss will be handing it over, seeing that you’re an important person to your organization,” wika ng estranghero.

“Oh, if my calculation is right, you’re not gonna kill me right now, then. So magmamatigas muna ako nang konti,” sagot ni Tres. But what if his calculation is wrong?

“If that’s your choice.” At bumaling sa kanyang smartphone ang lalaki.

Tres closed his eyes as he murmured, “Here I come, Nina Dobrev.” And the stranger activated the Elixir of Life. Tres opened his eyes, but they were blank, like a gorgeous Frankenstein on mask. Nilapitan ito ng dalawang lalaki mula sa kalabang organisasyon at binigyan ng suntok at sipa. Of course, he won’t be feeling it, but still, it’s quite unfair.

“Snakes!” I hissed. Napatingin sa akin ang nakamaskarang pinuno ng organisasyon.

“There you are, sweetie. I think it’s a lucky day. Hindi namin alam kung bakit ang hirap nang lumapit sa iyo after the second gift. Palagi na lang umuuwing bangkay ang mga top assassins namin from trying to get you. It’s like you’re a black hole. I was thinking if you’re the one who’s killing them off, subalit mukha namang wala kang ganung kapasidad. Maybe it’s someone. And that, you will tell us,” wika nito.

I was shocked on his declaration. And strangely, tulad nang napasok ako sa isang hopeless na situation na pakana ni Tres sa mansion, isa lang ang pumasok sa utak ko. Van… Van Freniere.

“I. WONT. TELL. YOU. ANYTHING!” Matigas kong wika which earned me another hit to my head and suddenly, I lay limp, falling to unconsciousness, the last thing I could think of was Detective Penber’s message: It’s a trick.

[21] Chapter 21: The Lion in its Cage

Author’s Note: Follow Siel Alstreim on Twitter! @sielalstreim.

Chapter 21: The Lion in its Cage

I had a terrible headache today. Meron ba akong hang-over? Yeah, mukhang naparami ang inom ko kagabi. Kagabi? Ano'ng meron kagabi? Party! Yes. I was on a party. I was gorgeous last night. I was on a masquerade party. Pero isang glass lang ng champagne ang nahawakan ko. At isa pa, bakit pati katawan ko masakit? Napaaway na naman ba ako? At bakit natutulog ako nang nakaupo? Bakit nakatali ang mga kamay at paa ko?

Tila isang malamig na tubig na bumuhos sa akin ang reyalisasyon ng totoong nangyari kagabi. Shit! Bakit ba pinairal ko na naman ang katangahan ko? Bagama't tumututol pa ang mga mata kong magmulat ay pinilit ko itong buksan upang makita ang paligid. I should have stuck with the plan. Bakit ba hindi ako nag-iisip? Sana'y makagawa ng paraan si Detective Penber upang ma-remedyuhan ang kapalpakan ko. We don't even have a proper contingency plan!

Sa una ay madilim ang paligid. Unti-unting nasanay ang aking mga mata sa kadiliman at napagtanto kong nasa isa akong kuwarto. Walang bintana. May isang pinto lang. Tanging isang kulay dilaw na bumbilya lang ang nagbibigay ng liwanag. At hindi ako nag-iisa sa kuwarto. Sa gitna ng kuwarto ay nakahiga ang katulad kong nakagapos ding si Tres Freniere. He still had that gorgeously rogue features bagama't may mga pasa ang kanyang katawan. Ngayon ko rin lang napansin na pareho pa rin naming suot ang mga damit namin mula sa masquerade party. We just lost our masks. And his inner dress was half-unbuttoned exposing his thinly haired, smooth muscled chest. Inilibot ko ang paningin ko sa paligid. Walang posibleng daan upang tumakas maliban sa kaisa-isang pinto na malamang ay may bantay sa labas. Damn. Sinikap kong ilapit ang sarili ko sa walang malay na si Tres at pinilit na gisingin sa pamamagitan ng pagsanggi ng aking nakagapos na mga paa. Umungol lang ito bilang tugon.

"Sebastian! Wake Up!" Nilakasan ko pa ang pagsanggi sa kanya hanggang sa mauwi iyon sa sipa.

"Argh!" Daing nito at dahan-dahang nagmulat ng mata. His eyes were reddish at napapalibutan ng maitim na marka. He looked so tired and blank. Ganito ba ang after effects ng Elixir of Life? He looked terrible, but well,

still gorgeous. Subalit para siyang lifeless, ancient persona na na-stuck sa time. Tila wala siyang buhay subalit may imortal na eksistensya. Lifeless, immortal. Frankenstein… The Elixir of Life.

Nagtiim ang mga bagang ni Tres nang rumehistro sa medyo pundido pang utak nito ang kinasasadlakang sitwasyon.

“You’ve been tricked, Sebastian! Hindi ka dapat nagpapadala on your lust for power and money!” Seryoso kong wika. Isang matalim na sulyap ang ibinigay niya sa akin.

“I don’t take advise from stupid girls who should have been at home in the first place. Hindi ka dapat nagpapadala sa curiousity and emotions mo!” Seryoso rin niyang sagot. Gusto kong matawa sa sitwasyon namin. Tricks and stupidity. Pareho naming sinasabi sa mukha ng isa’t isa ang mga bagay na hindi namin dapat ginawa. And then I remembered Van telling me that Tres and I were the same. Brash and rogue. Maybe he got some points right. Just some points. Mas mabuti naman ang character ko kesa sa kriminal na ito.

“Maybe Van is right,” mahina kong nasabi. Kunot-noo akong tinitigan ni Tres at saka biglang tumawa. Oh, he’s returning back to normal.

“Giovanni’s always right. I was just trying to take some counterflows,” sagot niya. Hindi ko naintindihan ang kanyang sinabi. Counterflows? Mukha namang napansin ni Tres ang hindi ko pagkakaintindi sa kanya kung kaya’t muli siyang nagsalita.

“He already told me that he didn’t trust this transaction. That it is flawed. But I didn’t listen. But I would never admit something between the lines of ‘I should have listened.’ Hell, no.” Uh, he’s quite stupid for a monster. Pero ganun naman talaga ang mga monsters, eh. There’s no logic. Only lust for horrors. I was really quite wondering about our similarities. Just like him, I’m always a rebel. I hate normalcy. I always take counterflows no matter how hard it is.

“You’re quite an idiot, you know,” wika ko na higit na pinatutungkulan ang sarili ko.

“Sharp tongue. I would have loved to kill you. I should have met you before Giovanni did. That way, I could have killed you in an instant. And there would be no complications.”

Bakit ba sa mga sinasabi niya ay parang gusto niyang palabasin na si Van ang dahilan kung bakit hindi pa niya kinikitil ang buhay ko? And during that party, did Van save me from his monstrous brother once again?

Naalala ko tuloy ang huling sinabi sa akin ng mga pesteng may hawak sa amin ngayon. Someone was killing their men who were after me. Was it Van? Was he helping me all this time? Siya ba ang pumapatay sa mga assassins na nagtatangka sa buhay ko? If he was, I didn’t know how I would feel about that.

“Bakit kumplikadong patayin ako? Is it because of Van?” Tanong ko.

“Well, technically yes. Pero wala akong kahit na anong hypothesis kung bakit pinipigilan niya akong patayin ka. I don’t think that he’s in love with you. The Frenieres had forgotten what love was. Plus, I don’t see anything special about you,” turan niya.

“That was so enlightening, you know. It’s stupid to even consider love as his reasons. He only probably wanted to be the one to kill me slowly,” walang emosyon kong wika. A man like Van will never, ever love someone. He never loved Trinity. Probably just used her. He never loved any of those other girls. He will never love me. And why am I even bothered by that? Why am I even thinking about this?

“Careful. Merong maiksing limitasyon ang pasensya ko. At gagawin ko iyong excuse upang patayin ka.” Tumalim muli ang kanyang mga mata. I just rolled my eyes on him.

“You’re tied up to the bones. Even your soul seemed to be tied up, too. Kaya hindi ka makakagawa ng anumang hakbang upang patayin ako.”

“Argh!” Gigil na naibulalas ni Tres nang mapagtanto niyang tama ako. A lion in its cage. It’s quite fascinating and yet, pitiful. Ano kaya ang nararamdaman ngayon ng makapangyarihang si Sebastian Freniere?

Helpless, pathetic? Parang nararamdaman ko ngayon. I hate not being able to fight for my self.

Maya-maya ay kumalma ito at pinilit na umupo katulad ng posisyon ko. “Bakit hindi ko nakikitaan ng takot sa kamatayan ang mga mata mo?” Biglang tanong ni Tres. Ibinaling ko ang mga mata ko sa ibang lugar maliban sa kanya.

“Because I’m Summer Leondale,” sagot ko. Gusto ko sanang idagdag that I’m good at pretending that I’m not scared.

“Oh, nice to meet you, Summer. So that’s your name,” wika niya.

“Ipinakilala na ako ni Van dati sa mansyon. Are you really that stupid?” Umiiling na tanong ko.

Ngumiti ito nang nakakaloko. “I already concluded that I will kill you any second that time. Hindi ko pinapangalanan ang mga bangkay na naiiwan ko. Pero seryoso pala si Giovanni na protektahan ka. Ano kayang gagawin niya sa’yo? I can’t see the point as to why he’s treating you like a f cking national treasure. He even threatened me! My name is Death! That little devil found a way to chill the hell in me.” Mula sa sarkastikong ngiti ay nagtapos sa frustrated na ekspresyon si Tres. Like me. Ganito ako pag iniisip ko ang kakulangan ko kumpara kay Autumn. Damn. Maybe Van was really right. Si Tres at ako, pareho lang kami.

Binigyan ni Van ng threat ang kapatid niya. That must be a serious threat para maapektuhan si Tres. Speaking of Death, naalala ko si Jin Cast. Makikipagkasundo siya kay kamatayan wag lang nitong kunin ang buhay ko. Paano kaya siya makikipagkasundo kay Tres? And then, biglang sumiksik sa utak ko ang seryoso at walang ekspresyon na si Van. Hindi siya nakipagkasundo kay kamatayan. Pinatiklop niya ang kamatayan. Wala sa loob na napailing ako. Why am I comparing them? It’s obvious that they got different reasons. Jin’s got insane reasons for protecting me. Van had…. had… I don’t know. Bakit ba ang hirap basahin ng iniisip niya?

“So why didn’t you kill me?” Tanong ko. At hindi rin ako makapaniwalang nag-uusap kami nang mahinahon ng taong ito. Well, at least, we’re not

trying to slit each other’s throat. Thanks to these rough ropes.

“Because Giovanni is a madman. No one would even think of taking on his wrath. Ang nakikita mong Giovanni sa Montello High ay isang puno ng kontrol sa sarili at kalmadong taong nakasuot ng maskara. No one should make him take that off! Not even me, not even Sir Algernon, not even that poor little boy, or even my mother.” His face suddenly became soft as he stopped at his words. He’s got a soft side towards the Freniere woman. But the thing that shocked me most was his revelation about Van. I’ve always felt fear whenever I stare at the depths of his mysterious eyes. Nakakalunod. Parang hindi ka nito hahayaang makaahon nang buhay. And that was still a mask? I never want to see behind the mask but at the same time, I felt curious about it. Who’s the real Giovanni Freniere? How dangerous is he? How deadly could he become?

You don’t know him that well. Ethan’s words rang in my ears. Mukhang tama siya. I didn’t know Van that well.

“What happened to your mother?” Tanong ko. She must be really important to him para magkaroon nang ganitong reaksyon si Tres.

Ngumiti siya nang mapait. Siya yata ang taong nagtataglay ng ekspresyon na naglalaro sa bitter smile, sarcastic smile, mocking smile and demonic smile ang pinapakawalang ngiti. “Naranasan mo na bang mawalan ng pinakaimportanteng tao sa buhay mo?” Tanong niya. Whoah! Sebastian Freniere is opening up! He must be really different from Van. O isa itong effect ng Elixir of Life?

Hindi ako sumagot. Pero inisip niyang ‘no’ ang ibig sabihin nun.

“You’re lucky. You’re still spared from hell! Alam mo ba kung anong nangyari nang mawala siya? Parang nasira ang susi at naputol ang kadenang nagtatago at pumipigil sa kasamaan sa loob namin. Parang kumawala ang mga halimaw mula sa puso naming mag-aama. I should have killed that Novou. But Van had the greatest control and suggested not to.” Nag-flash sa isip ko ang bangkay ni Andrew Novou. Hinding-hindi ko na yata makakalimutan ang senaryong iyon.

Van had the greatest control. And the stronger you can control yourself is the more powerful you are. God! Giovanni Freniere must be invincible!

“What’s with you, Summer? Ano’ng kailangan ni Van sa’yo?” Sa ganitong tagpo ay biglang bumukas ang pinto ng silid. Tatlong armado at nakamaskarang mga lalaki ang pumasok. Well, good thing na hindi na masquerade mask ang gamit nila. Mas mukha na silang goons. Inilapag nila sa harap namin ang dalawang tray ng pagkain na naglalaman ng fried chicken, rice at tig-isang mansanas. May kasama ring dalawang botelya ng tubig.

“Dalawampung minuto para sa inyong almusal,” wika ng isa. Kung ganun ay umaga na.

“Paano kami kakain kung hindi niyo tatanggalin ang mga tali sa kamay namin?” Tanong ni Tres. Nag-isip sandali ang tatlo. Paano nga naman kami kakain?

“Tanggalan mo ng gapos ang babae at hayaan siyang pakainin ang sarili niya pati na ang lalaking iyan. Hindi natin puwedeng pakawalan ang isang iyan,” wika ng isa. I looked at Tres who seemed to be more frustrated now. Mukhang kaya niyang patumbahin ang tatlong ito kung makakawala lang ang kanyang mga kamay. Nang pakawalan nila ako ay nag-umpisa akong kumain. Crap. Gutom na gutom ako. Saka ko na iisipin ang tungkol sa pagtakas. Nang maubos ko na ang laman ng aking tray ay binalingan ko na ang tray Tres. Uh. Parang mas mahirap magpakain ng halimaw kaysa sa malikot na toddler. Tinanggap ni Tres ang unang subo ko, pagkatapos ay kumagat ako sa apple sa kanyang tray.

“Hey! That’s my fucking apple!” Galit na reklamo ni Tres.

“I’m a businesswoman, Sebastian. You owe me with my services,” ang tangi ko lang sagot. Tahimik na ipinagpatuloy ko ang pagpapakain kay Tres. He seemed to have a proper manner when eating even when his hands and feet were all tied up. By proper manners, tahimik at marahan niyang nginunguya ang pagkain habang pinupulbos niya ang kaluluwa ko at kaluluwa ng tatlong armadong lalaki sa kanyang masasamang tingin.

Atubiling nagpapalitan ng tingin ang mga goons na kasama namin. That's Tres. He could always have that effect on people.

Nagulat ako nang biglang may umagaw sa akin ang tray na hawak ko. Mukhang ang taong ito ang nakaharap ko kagabi sa parking lot. "Tama na yan," galit niyang wika.

Yumuko si Tres at nagpakawala ng nakapangingilabot na tawa. Kahit ako'y napaurong nang kaunti mula sa pagkakalapit ko sa kanya. Nakakatakot ang kanyang aura. Parang kaya niyang patayin ang kahit sino'ng gusto niya kahit na siya's nakagapos.

"Kayong tatlo. Masyado niyo akong pinaliligaya," wika ni Tres at saka nag-angat ng paningin. I couln't see a person anymore. I could only see a devil from hell now.

"Tumigil ka," malakas na sabi ng isa. Nakatulala lang ako kay Tres. Natatakot ako. Takot na takot. Malamang na ganito ang nararamdaman ng mga armadong kalalakihang ito. Lumapit ang isa kay Tres at pinukpok ito ng dala niyang rifle. Muling napayuko si Tres. Nakita ko ang dugong nanggagaling sa maliit na sugat sa kanyang noo nang mag-angat siya ng paningin.

"There's no need to do that! Coward!" Sigaw ko sa lalaking humampas sa ulo ni Tres. Pinilit kong tawirin ang pagitan namin ni Tres at nang magawa ko iyon ay agad kong tinanggal ang arm warmer ko sa kaliwang braso at inilagay iyon sa sugat niya. Hell. Hindi tumitigil ang pagdurugo nito. Wala namang ibang reaksiyon si Tres maliban sa matalim na tingin na ipinukol niya sa mga naka-maskarang kalalakihan.

"Hindi mo kami masisindak, Tres. Matuto kang ikonsidera ang sitwasyon mo para alam mo kung saan ka lulugar!" Wika ng isa sa mga lalaki.

Mahinang tumawa si Tres. "Ano nga ba sa tingin mo ang sitwasyon? Hindi maipagkakaila ang mga takot sa inyong dibdib. I can taste all your fears. Delicious fears." Tila napipi ang tatlo. Of course, Tres is a real monster. Nag-umpisa nang maglakad palabas ang tatlong goons nang mapatingin sa akin si Tres at muling magsalita.

“And by the way, who hurt her last night?” Tanong niya.

“Ako,” maangas na amin ng lalaking umagaw sa tray kanina.

Umiling si Tres sabay sabing, “Poor soul. You’ll be haunted by now. Enjoy your life while you can. Someone’s coming for you,” seryosong sagot ni Tres na ikinakunot ng noo ko. Tila naman na-istatwa sa kinatatayuan niya ang lalaking nakaharap ko kagabi. Kung hindi pa siya itinulak ng kanyang kasama ay hindi pa niya magagawang humakbang. Malakas na sumara ang pinto nang makalabas na ang tatlo.

“Hindi siya maitatago ng kanyang maskara,” seryoso pa ring komento ni Tres. Diniinan ko ang paglapat ng tela sa kanyang noo at galit niyang ibinaling ang atensyon sa akin.

“Ano ba?” Sita niya.

“You’re creepy! Wala na sila kaya tigilan mo na ang pananakot mo,” inis kong sagot.

“And I thought you don’t know how to be afraid!” Asar na wika ni Tres. Nagkibit lang ako ng balikat and then it struck me like a frigging yellow light bulb. Ngumiti ako kay Tres.

“You did a great job by scaring the hell out of them.” At saka tinanggal ko ang tela sa kanyang noo. Rumehistro din ang reyalisasyon kay Tres at prantikong ngumiti.

“Oh, freak! Faster!” Wika niya habang kinakalagan ko ang mga paa ko. Yes, sa sobrang tuliro ng mga kalalakihan kanina ay nalimutan nilang igapos muli ang mga kamay ko. Hell! I could stand now! Medyo namamanhid ang mga paa ko subalit dali-dali akong pumunta kay Tres at pinilit kalasin ang mas kumplikadong tali sa kanyang kamay.

“Summer! What’s taking you so long?” Nauubos ang pasensyang reklamo ni Tres.

“Uh. Masyadong madaming knots! Wala ka pang malay ay tinakot mo na agad sila kaya ganito ang pagkakagapos nila sayo. Speaking of National Treasure!”

“Shit! Shut the f ck up and get me out of this ropes!” Singhal niya.

Three more knots. We can make it. We can escape from this.

Two more knots. Oh, crap. Come on!

One more knot…

And then the door banged open at limang kalalakihan at ang tila pinuno na nakamaskara pa rin tulad kagabi ang pumasok.

“Damn it!” Tres cursed as three people grabbed him and quickly tied him again. Isang lalaki naman ang humila sa buhok ko but I threw a punch that landed on his face. Nabitawan niya ako at saka ako tumakbo patungo sa nakabukas na pinto subalit bago pa ako lumabas ay bigla akong nakaramdam ng matinding kirot sa binti ko. Napatigil ako at yumuko. Isang hunter’s knife ang nakatarak sa kanang binti ko at kusa akong napasalampak sa sahig. Lumapit sa akin ang dalawang kalalakihan and dragged me back to the center of the room with the well-tied up and bruised Tres. Mabilis nila akong ginapos at saka lumapit sa akin ang tila pinuno nila.

“Argh! Damn!” Sigaw ko nang hugutin niya ang hunter’s knife.

“Feisty. I thought I could never use this knife. It’s actually a collector’s knife. You must be proud of tasting its sharpness,” wika nito habang pinapahid ng panyo ang mga dugo sa kutsilyo.

“You’re a sick bastard!” Sigaw kong muli. It hurts. It just f cking hurts! At patuloy pa rin sa pagdugo ang binti ko. Pumatak na rin ang luha ko sa sakit.

“But of course. Cause if I’m not then I won’t be able to meet you,” sagot nito at saka naglabas ng cellphone. He dialed numbers at saka inilapit iyon sa tainga.

“Negotiator ng Mafia Freniere. Wala ka ba talagang balak magpakilala?” Narinig kong wika nito sa kausap. Mahinang tumawa si Tres sa tabi ko.

“Ibigay mo ang dokumento at mabubuhay si Tres ng Mafia Freniere,” wika nitong muli. Doon ay malakas na tumawa si Tres. Inilapit ng tila pinuno ang cellphone kay Tres. “Sabihin mo sa kanyang ibigay ang dokumento kapalit ng kalayaan mo,” utos nito.

Nakakalokong ngumiti si Tres at saka nagsalita. “They’ve been hurting Summer since last night. At ilang segundo lang ang nakakalipas ay may nakatarak na collector’s hunting knife sa binti niya. That would definitely hurt---”

Binawi ng pinuno ang cellphone at ibinalik sa tainga. Litong tiningnan ko si Tres. Subalit nakukuha na ang atensyon ko ng kirot sa aking binti. First time kong ma-injure ng ganito. Sanay ako sa sapakan at bugbugan pero ang paggamit ng armas? Foul play. Napansin kong kumunot ang noo ng pinuno sa kausap sa cellphone na mas ikinalakas ng tawa ni Tres.

“Hell! The girl’s crying! You should have seen it! And she’s bleeding!” Parang nababaliw na nagsisigaw ni Tres. Tila nagbago ang mood ng pinuno at inilapit sa akin ang cellphone.

Wala akong balak magsalita subalit hindi ko napigilan ang paghikbi dahil sa sakit na nararamdaman ko. Then I heard a violent static sound, just like last night on the Masquerade Party. And suddenly, I know. I know and I’m sure that it’s Van on the other line.

“Say something.” Marahas at buong-buo ang boses na narinig ko mula sa kabilang linya. There’s some desperation and complete anger in his voice… and at the same time, it’s menacingly calm. At sa pagkarinig ko pa lang sa boses na iyon ay parang gusto kong umiyak ng malakas. Tila ako batang gustong magsumbong. Pero hindi ko matagpuan ang tapang upang gawin iyon. I felt like I’m having some restrictions on myself. Maybe it’s my pride. And then, as if to settle things, kumilos si Tres at sinagi ang dumudugo ko pang binti. Gusto kong mahilo at mahimatay sa dami ng dugong nakikita ko, at sa kirot na parang gustong magpamanhid sa aking katinuan.

“F CK! IT HURTS, DEVIL! IT F CKING HURTS!” Pasigaw kong sabi at saka tumulo ang masaganang luha mula sa mga mata ko. Damn that collector’s knife! Kelan pa ako naging iyakin? Kung makakalabas ako rito, wawasakin ko lahat ng kutsilyo sa mundo.

“You’re crying. You need to stop crying or—”

Inagaw na ng taong naka-maskara ang aparato bago ko pa narinig ang mga sumunod pang sinabi ni Van.

“Hindi ko naiintindihan kung ano’ng kalokohan ang nangyari. Pero kailangan mong ibigay ang dokumento,” seryosong wika ng estranghero at saka ibinaba ang tawag. “Anyway, being a hospitable man, I shall give you my warmest welcome through a gift.”

Naglabas siya ng dalawang maliit na tablet mula sa isang maliit na paperbox. Walang nagawa si Tres nang pilit na iniligay sa bibig niya ang isa. I watched him, horrified, as he went blank. And then the masked stranger turned to me. Helplessly and feeling like the weakest person existing in the world, he put the small tablet in my mouth. And quickly as a dream could be, I wasn’t there anymore.

[22] Chapter 22: The Elixir of Life

Authors’ Note:

“That we never say is ours and we only say is past.” – Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

This chapter, The Elixir of Life, really took the better of me. It actually had me looking back on my younger days. Yeah, childhood bestfriend/crush sucks. Never really had happy endings. Eleven years, I even waited for eleven years, haha. But now, I realized that I was just a kid by then. And he’d never been mine in the first place. Good thing, I finally moved on! And I could just use those memories for some story inspiration.

And the soundtrack for this chapter is Sober of Kelly Clarkson. Here goes for all the readers with ‘Summer-Childhood-Years’.

“And I don’t know

This could break my heart or save me

Nothing’s real

Until you let go completely

So here I go with all my thoughts

I’ve been saving

So here I go with all my fears

Weighing on me

Three months and I’m still sober

Picked all my weeds but kept the flowers

But I know, it’s never really over

And I don’t know

I could crash and burn but maybe

At the end of this road

I might catch a glimpse of me

So I won’t worry about my timing

I wanna get it right

No comparing, second guessing

No, not this time

Three months and I’m still breathing

Been a long road since those hands

I left my tears in but I know

It’s never really over, no, wake up

Three months and I’m still standing here

Three months and I’m getting better, yeah

Three months and I still am

Three months and it’s still harder now

Three months I’ve been living here without you now

Three months, yeah, three months

Three months and I’m still breathing

Three months and I still remember it

Three months and I wake up

Three months and I’m still sober

Picked all my weeds but kept the flowers.”

I posted the song here because I just felt that I have to. :P Lovelots Readers! You’re really awesome! Patuloy akong nagsusulat para sa mga katulad ninyong hindi sumusukong magbasa ng Montello.

Belated Happy Birthday kay Ellabeyb23. Good thing that I’m taking down notes of comments and messages. Sumasabog talaga ang gmail inbox ko. And thanks to my Editor MUB sa pagpupuno ng mga kakulangan ko, like sa pagiging loser sa pagchecheck ng Social Networks. haha. And for thanks4dbrokenheart: I’ve read your conversations with M. Thank you for the love. I’m offering you my services on killing ‘THAT PERSON’ who BROKE your good heart. .^

Whooh! It’s really a long note. Pagbigyan niyo na ako, haha, since dito lang ako nagkakaroon ng interactions. (Editor: Sabi ko kasi bumili na sya ng laptop!) Thanks for loving Montello and me!

Enjoy sembreaks and holidays! Happy Halloween!

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Chapter 22: The Elixir Of Life

Am I dreaming? Am I still alive or maybe I’m already dead? Dahil kung ano man ang kasagutan sa mga katanungang iyon ay wala na akong pakialam. Hindi ko na rin gustong maghanap ng paliwanang kung bakit nakikita ko ang mga bagay na nakikita ko ngayon. I’m on a Grand Ball. Lahat ng mga tao sa paligid ay naka-postura sa kanilang pinakamagandang kasuotan. Lahat ay nakasuot ng makikintab na maskara.

Subalit may dalawang katangi-tanging tao ang naroroon. Sila na yata ang pinaka-eleganteng nilalang na nasa sa pagdiriwang na ito. Nasa gitna sila ng magarang dance floor at kapwa walang suot na maskara. At isa sa mga iyon, ay ako. Subalit mas hindi kapani-paniwala kung sino ang isa pang taong iyon na kanina ko pa katitigan. Napaka-guwapo ng kanyang ngiti at kitang-kita ko ang kasiglahan sa kislap ng kanyang mga mata. Uminit ang mga mata ko. Tila gusto kong umiyak.

“L-Lawrence,” bulong ko sabay ng paglabo ng aking mga mata dahil sa luha. Humakbang siya palapit sa akin, subalit awtomatiko akong napaatras. Hindi ko alam kung anong mararamdaman ko. Naguguluhan ako, natatakot, nalulungkot, nasisiyahan. Nababaliw na yata ako. Siguro nga’y nababaliw na talaga ako dahil nakikita ko ang isang tulad niya. Huminto siya sa paglapit nang makita niya ang alinlangan sa aking mga mata.

“My Lovely Summer,” narinig kong wika niya. Ganun pa rin ang boses niya. Buong-buo, sinsero at musika sa aking pandinig. Ikinurap ko ang aking mga mata dahil lubhang nanlalabo na ito. Tuluyang nalaglag ang aking mga luha at nakita ko ang mabilis na paglapit ni Lawrence.

“Shh. You’re crying again,” wika niya kasabay ng pagpahid sa aking mga luha. Hindi pa rin ako makapaniwala. Nakatitig lang ako sa kanya habang umiiyak.

“Totoo bang ikaw yan, Lawrence?” Tanong ko. Subalit bigla namang tila nagkaroon ng time warp dahil nagbago ang paligid. Wala na ang Grand Ball. Wala na ang magagarang damit subalit naroon pa rin kami ni

Lawrence. I was suddenly transported to my Elementary uniform and braided hair. And I was crying. Pamilyar sa akin ang eksena at tila pinapanuod ko lang ang sarili ko… isang grade-schooler na Summer Leondale.

“Sinong nagpaiyak saiyo?” Tanong ni Lawrence— isang gradeschooler na Lawrence.

Itinuro ko ang isa sa aking mga kaklase. Agad siyang nagtungo sa direksiyong iyon. Nagmamadali naman akong sumunod sa kanya. Nakasarado ang classroom na pinagtataguan ng kaklase kong bully. Matangkad kasi siyang lalaki at magaling mang-asar. Malakas na sinipa iyon ni Lawrence at bumukas iyon.

“Bakit mo inaway si Summer? Bakla ka ba? Pumapatol sa babae?” Galit na tanong ni Lawrence na naka-kuyom ang kamao.

“Mayabang kasi iyang syota mo! Kala niya kaya niyang ilista sa blackboard lahat! Hindi naman ako NOISY, ah!” Sagot ng kaklase ko.

Hindi ko mapigilang mag-blush nang sinabi niyang ‘syota’ ko si Lawrence. I know the meaning of that. And we’re so young for such stuff! “He bullied me! Inaasar niya ako!” Umiiyak kong sumbong.

“Sige, sumbungera! Kahit magsama pa kayong dalawa—” hindi na nakapagpatuloy pa ang madaldal kong classmate dahil nasapak na ito nang sunod-sunod ni Lawrence.

Muling nag-shift ang paligid, and a much older me was suddenly holding a Valentine’s Card.

“Kanino ba ito galing?” Tanong ko.

“Kay Kent. Yung bestfriend ko,” sagot ni Lawrence. Kent is the campus crush on our school. But I’m so young for that, and my Dad might scold at me.

“Pagagalitan ako ni Daddy,” malungkot kong sabi.

“Di ba, crush mo si Kent? I’ll keep this in my bag. Tapos sabihin mo sa akin kapag babasahin mo para hindi ma-check nina Tita Wilhelmina sa bag mo, okay?” Wika ni Lawrence na ikinatuwa ko.

“Thank you! Sasabihin ko din sa friend ko na i-crush ka niya para pareho tayong may crush!” Nakangiti kong sabi na sinagot niya lang ng simangot.

But suddenly, I was on the school’s comfort room. Crying. Walang tigil ang pag-iyak ko habang naka-tingin sa walang tigil sa pagdurugo kong daliri. Bawat pagpawi ng tubig mula sa gripo upang alisin ang dugo, ay may lumalabas na panibago. Gusto ko nang bumagsak sa sahig dahil parang may humuhukay sa tiyan ko tuwing nakikita ko ang dugong nawawala sa akin.

“Call my mom!” Sigaw ko sa mga nanunuod kong kaklase. But hell, I forgot my bag in my classroom. Naroon ang cellphone ko.

“I will die. Kasalanan mo ito, Jonas! Makukulong ka!” Sisi ko sa mataba kong kaklase. It’s actually my fault dahil tinapon ko ang bag niya, then nakipaghilahan ako for my bag na itatapon rin sana niya. Nahawakan ko yung sharp edge ng lock and it cut on my middle finger. Technically, it was no one’s fault. Gusto ko lang na may masisisi.

“Hindi kita sinugatan,” namumutlang wika ni Jonas.

“You killed me! I will die!” Naghihisterya kong wika. And then nakita ko sa mga nanunuod ang crush kong si Kent. Gusto kong mag-evaporate dahil basang-basa ang mukha ko ng luha at pawis. May mga drops of blood rin ang blouse ko. I was so sure I will die. Napansin kong may humahawan sa gitna ng mga nanunuod na estudyante. At nakita ko si Lawrence na papalapit sa direksyon ko. May dalang dahon ng bayabas.

“Lawrence… I’ll die,” umiiyak kong sabi.

“Cut lang yan. Tumigil ka na sa pag-iyak,” wika niya at kinuha ang may sugat kong kamay saka sinipat. Ibinigay niya sa akin ang dahon ng bayabas na tinitigan ko lang.

“Ilagay mo sa bibig mo, tapos nguyain mo saka mo ilagay sa sugat mo para matigil ang pagdugo,” utos niya. I remembered that he was a boy scout… but…

“I can’t. Bitter. And I’m not a boyscout. Starscout lang ako. Hindi ko pa kaya,” sagot ko. I will never put that suspicious leaves in my mouth. Umiling-iling si Lawrence nang ma-realize niyang hindi ko siya susundin. Natigil ako sa pag-iyak nang ilagay niya iyon sa kanyang bibig at saka nginuya, tapos ay inilagay sa sugat ko. Wala na akong nagawa nang kunin niya ang panyo ko at itali iyon sa sugat.

Nakatulala pa rin ako sa kanya hanggang sa matapos siya.

“Tapos na po, mahal na prinsesa,” nakangiti niyang wika nang mapansing nakatitig lang ako sa ginawa niya. That was when I realized who my true crush was.

“Goat! Nag-toothbrush ka ba?” Ang tangi ko lang nasabi. Tumawa lang siya.

And then, I was crying again. A graduation march was playing on the background. Why does the time keep on warping and I can’t do anything about it? It’s like I’m a paperboat and carried into different places.

“Babalik ka di ba?” Tanong ko kay Lawrence na bestfriend at crush ko na rin.

“I will. Nandito yata ang mahal na prinsesa. And Summer is summer. I’ll come back every summer.”

“I will wait. Because I am Summer,” matamlay kong wika. I blinked and when I opened my eyes, it was already summer.

I was a teenage girl talking to a pretty, young man in a coffee shop while the rain is starting to pour outside. Mas gumuwapo at kumisig si Lawrence. He was back. He was back for me. I’ve been waiting for him. And the wait felt like forever. But he’s here. I was his Princess, and he was my knight. He

would kneel in front of me and kiss my hand. He would promise me his protection and loyalty and I would be safe with him every time.

But then the coffee shop turned into a Grand Ball. We were looking in each other's eyes. Wala pa ring nagbago sa kanya.

"You're back," umiiyak subalit nakangiti kong wika.

"I never left your heart. I'm always there," sagot niya.

"I'm sorry. I was mad the last time we met. I never had the chance to say thank you. For protecting me, for caring for me. For always being there for me. Napaka-tanga ko dahil galit kaagad ang inuna ko. Hindi ko man lang na-consider ang feelings mo." I cried my heart out. Trying to get out that regret. It was a huge regret that I had a hard time dealing with, and it finally wanted to get out.

"Summer, you'll always be my Princess," narinig kong sagot niya. Hindi ko pa rin naiintindihan kung ano na ang nangyayari but all that matter was that he was here. And he was real. He was so real.

"I was so selfish! I should have known how to consider things. Dapat mas inisip ko ang mga ginawa mo para sa akin. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." My tears spilled like blood on an open wound. It won't stop flowing. I was pouring my heart out— like a confession before I die.

"Please don't cry, Summer. Nasaan na ang masayahin at spoiled brat na Summer na nakilala ko? I'm already here. I'm back. I've come back for you." Akma niyang hahawakan ang basa sa luha kong pisngi subalit isa sa mga panauhin ang nagtanggal ng maskara at hinila ako palayo kay Lawrence. That man… that devil… Van Freniere. At sa bigla niyang paghila sa akin ay tila ibinalik niya ako sa coffee shop. Time warped again.

I was sitting across Lawrence and I was so happy to see him again. Parang nagkaroon ng kulay ang paligid. Rainy days weren't gloomy anymore. It actually looked wonderful. Perfect. I've been waiting for this day. I've been waiting for this man.

“You’re really back for me,” masaya kong wika.

“Kamusta ka na, Summer?” Tanong niya.

“I’m good. Well, now that you’re here, I’m better. I’m so happy to see you,” sagot ko.

“I’m happier to see you. So kamusta ang boyfriend?” Tanong niya.

I blushed. Was he checking if I’m still available? Should I tell him that I’ve been waiting for him? That all he needed to do is ask and I’ll be his girl starting right at this glorious moment.

“Wala akong boyfriend. I’m just 15. Eh, ikaw? Kamusta ang girlfriend?” Balik tanong ko. Of course, he’s single. He must be.

“She’s fine. She’s going to Arturia. But not yet my girlfriend. Just my future girlfriend,” sagot niya na ikinatanga ko. Tila naging kulay grey ang paligid. He had someone already. And it was not me. It was definitely not me dahil I was just about to go on my starting year in highschool. That was quite a deadly revelation for me. But I still manage a fake smile. An obviously fake smile. That was when I started concealing things.

“Who is she? What’s her name? I-is she beautiful? Of course, she must be.” Gustong mag-self-destruct ng puso ko sa dibdib ko. This felt terrible. Tiningnan niya muna ako nang matiim na waring tinatantiya ang magiging reaksiyon ko.

“Summer, she’s your sister. I love Autumn,” sagot niya.

Natulala ako nang ilang saglit habang nag-si-sink-in ang mga sinabi niya. What kind of joke is this? What the hell is this?

I pulled all my strength para tumayo at tumakbo. Napatigil ako sa entrance ng coffeeshop dahil ang tila magical rain kanina ay naging delubyo sa paningin ko. Hindi ko alam kung kakayanin ko. Subalit nang mapalingon ako at makita kong susundan ako ni Lawrence ay ipinasya kong tumakbo palabas. There wasn’t any situation more tragic than right now with this

man I’ve been waiting for a long time. Nawala ang sense sa lahat ng bagay. It was like checking all my beliefs and realizing everything that I knew is wrong. I ran out of the coffee shop. I ran and ran. Gusto kong tumakas sa sitwasyon. Gusto kong takasan ang katotohanan. Gusto kong takasan ang sarili ko.

I’m so stupid to expect things to be the way it was a few years ago. We were just kids. We were just stupid kids who left empty promises. I was a princess then. But no one ever warned me that a Princess would never get scraped knees and scars. No one assured that a Princess would never be burned by a Dragon. No one said that a Princess would never be poisoned by a witch. Nobody said that not all Princess would end up with her beloved Prince. Not all Princesses could have happy endings. No one really lives a happily ever after. Because life is a dark fairytale! Damn me!

And then I reached the highway. Hindi ko napansin ang paparating na truck. Masyadong malakas ang ulan at halos malabo ang paligid sa aking paningin. I was frozen in the middle of the highway. I couldn’t even move my legs. Tila nakalimutang magfunction ng neurons ko habang nakatitig ako sa papalapit na sasakyan. The driver seemed to be blank? or drunk? or groggy. The truck is slippering on the wet aspalt. I wasn’t sure of anything. Isa lang ang sigurado ako. This was my end. It was a rainy ending for everthing. I closed my eyes at hinintay ko ang nakamamanhid na sakit na dulot ng katapusan. But it never came.

Someone pushed me hard. At sa pagmulat ng mga mata ko ay nakita ko ang pagbangga ng truck sa katawan ni Lawrence. Tumilapon ito nang ilang metro at saka malakas na bumagsak sa semento. I was horrified. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t even cry. I wanted to die because everything did not make sense anymore. I wanted to touch Lawrence. I wanted to give him my life. But I couldn’t! And I could never be…

Suddenly, all pain came rushing into me. Every pain that I kept inside. All the painful things that I concealed started to burn me.It put me in fire. It burned me to death. It started from a certain part of my leg. At habang nananaig ang sakit ay tila nawawala lahat. Ang Grandball, ang school, ang coffee shop… at si Lawrence.

“No! Lawrence! Don’t leave me! Please!” Pagmamakaawa ko sa kawalan. Everything started to fade to black.

“I wanna go with you! Take me with you! Pakiusap!” Pakiramdam ko ay nababaliw na ako. Ayokong mawala lahat. Gusto kong simulan ulit ang lahat sa Grand Ball at manipulahin ang mga nangyari sa coffeeshop. I would make it end better. Not like this. I wanted to stay and change things. I didn’t want to lose this, whatever this is. I didn’t want to lose Lawrence. Not again.

“Summer!” Tila mataas na boltahe ng kuryente ang bumalot sa aking katawan at nanuot sa aking binti. Sapilitang nagmulat ang aking mga mata upang umiyak.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” umiiyak kong wika. Pakiramdam ko ay paulit-ulit akong iniwan ni Lawrence. Hindi ko alam kung paano haharapin ang katotohanang binalikan ko.

“You never had time to think of happy things before they drugged you, right?” Ipinokus ko ang aking paningin sa nagsalita. And the reality of the situation kicked me hard on my gut. Nakakulong kami. At ang mas nakakarimarim na konklusyon ay ang pagkakadroga sa akin. So that’s the Elixir of Life. I thought it could only bring you eternal happiness. Pati rin pala ang pinaka-masakit na pakiramdam ay kaya nitong iparanas saiyo. Napatingin ako sa may benda kong binti.

“That’s so unfair. Ginamot nila ang binti mo, pero yung sa ulo ko hindi man lang nilagyan ng band-aids!” Komento niya.

Masama ko siyang tiningnan. “Kaya sinagi mo nang sinagi yung sugat ko dahil naiinggit ka!” Akusa ko sa kanya.

“Dual purpose. Para rin gisingin ka. Nakamamatay ang drogang iyan. And oh, you looked like the palest, bloodless, and lifeless vampire in a ballgown that I’ve ever seen,” sagot ni Sebastian. Pinagmasdan ko siya. He seemed to be drugged, too. Lifeless.

“You looked like a Zombie,” ganting insulto ko. Hindi niya iyon pinansin. Sa halip, mukhang may iba siyang balak pag-usapan.

“So tell me, who’s that Lawrence that you kept on calling just few minutes ago?” Tanong niya. Pinili kong huwag iyong sagutin at manatiling tahimik. Bumalik sa akin in full blast lahat ng negatibong emosyong naramdaman ko noon nang mawala si Lawrence. My heart was tearing apart. I’ve been hurting to death. And I’ve been blaming myself for all these years. I was punishing myself for killing Lawrence. It was my fault. I was so selfish.

“Oh, I’m getting curious about that guy. I think, I might just kill him instead.” Nakangiti pang wika ni Tres.

Mas tumalim ang tingin ko sa kanya. Nagsimula na ring magbantang muli ang mga sinusupil kong luha. Why Lawrence? May mga tao namang katulad ni Sebastian na hindi karapat-dapat mabuhay kumpara sa kanya. Why him?

“Maybe that was the reason your mother was killed. Dahil may taong katulad mo mag-isip.” I was losing my temper so I couldn’t guard my words. Nagulat ako nang marahas na gumalaw si Tres na tila gusto niya akong paslangin sa oras ding iyon. I should be feeling the fear now towards him but I couldn’t feel anything but pain.

“I became like this because they killed my mom!” Galit na galit na wika niya.

“Sa tingin mo ba mabubuhay siya kapag pinatay mo lahat ng tao sa mundo?” I flinched at my words. Ganito rin ang sinabi sa akin ni Autumn dati. Na hindi mabubuhay si Lawrence kahit sisihin at parusahan ko ang sarili ko.

“Wala kang alam, Summer Leondale!”

“And what the hell are those things that I do not know?! Cause surely, I know the same things as you do! You just have a twisted way of conceiving it!” Nagagalit ako. Tila naghahalo ang galit at sakit sa puso ko. It was like those chemicals in the lab room. I’m going to burst. At mukhang ganun din

si Tres. We were going to explode. Bakit ba kami pa ang nagsama? Kami na hindi marunong kumontrol sa sarili.

“They killed the most deserving person to live in the world! How the hell am I gonna let them live? It’s justice! And by being just gives me pleasure. Killing is pleasurable.”

“It’s not! Killing is not pleasurable! Killing is painful! Killing is worse than the experience of hell!” Hysterical kong salungat at tuluyang nalaglag ang luha ko. Hindi ko na madagdagan ang argumento ko dahil humahagulgol na ako. Tumahimik din si Tres subalit masama pa rin ang tingin sa direksiyon ko.

“Have you killed someone?” Biglang tanong ni Sebastian na ikinasinghap ko. Lalo akong napaiyak.

“I- I- I didn’t mean to. He shouldn’t be dead… if not for me. Sinayang lang niya ang buhay niya para sa walang kuwentang tulad ko. I killed him…” Umiiyak kong wika. Tinawag kong mamamatay-tao ang mga Freniere noon. Maybe I meant those words for me. Tila nanlamig ang paligid nang makita ko ang ekspresyon ni Tres. Bloodlust. He wants to kill.

“After this… After this f cking situation, don’t you ever try to cross my path. Because the next time I see you, I will kill you. You’re one of those people who don’t deserve to live.”

Tila sinintensiyahan ako nang marinig ko ang sinabi niya. I realized na kahit sinisisi ko ang sarili ko noon sa pagkamatay ni Lawrence ay may kaunting bahagi ng pagkatao ko na kumakapit pa rin sa buhay. Parang kagabi lang ay natatakot akong mamatay sa kamay ni Tres. Pero heto ako ngayon at sumasang-ayon na hindi nga ako karapat-dapat mabuhay. I’ve been trying to forget this part of my memories. Cause it might kill me. Cause I might have myself killed. Because I might easily accept death when it came to collect. Now, I realized that maybe Tres is right. The only way I can make up for killing Lawrence is to die.

Pareho naming hindi pinansin ang pagbukas ng pinto. Nakatungo lang ako habang pinapatay ng tingin ni Tres.

“Oh! What’s with the gloomy ambience here? How was Elixir of Life, folks?” Hindi ako nag-angat ng paningin. Boses iyon ng taong sumugat sa binti ko.

“You drugged me, bastard,” seryoso at mababa ang boses kong sagot. Napapagod na ako sa mga pangyayari. I’m so exhausted mentally, physically and emotionally. Hindi ko alam kung makakaya ko pa. I wanted to give up.

“Of course. Don’t tell me that you didn’t enjoy it,” wika nito. Gusto ko siyang sigawan. Gusto kong ipamukha sa kanya kung gaano ako ka-miserable ngayon. Pero sa halip ay kinontrol ko ang sarili ko. Walang sense na sayangin ang natitira ko pang lakas sa pakikipagtalo rito. Hindi rin sumagot si Tres. He’s probably busy counting the different ways to kill me.

Pero biglang may naalala ang isip ko. “Where’s Mirden?” Tanong ko.

“Mirden? The nerdy girl? The human tester.”

Nagtaas ako ng paningin sa aking narinig. Nakita ako ang nakamaskarang tila namumuno sa grupo at tatlo pang kasama nito.

“The what?” Gusto kong masiguro na hindi mali ang pandinig ko.

“Human Tester,” ngumisi pa ito pagkasabi nun.

“Ano’ng ginawa niyo sa kanya?!” Gusto ko siyang sugurin subalit mahigpit akong nakagapos at medyo nanghihina pa ako. I felt something darker stirring inside me. Akala ko lumabas na ang pinakamadilim na pagkatao ko, pero sa nararamdaman ko ngayon, nagdududa ako kung tao pa nga ba akong maituturing.

“Well, kailangan ko siyang bigyan ng credit for the success of the Elixir of Life. We should have killed her nang mahuli siya ng mga tauhan ko. But the boss said we could use her for laboratory purposes. Siya ang ginamit namin sa aming experiments.” Hindi ako makapaniwala. These were people who really deserve to die! Ano’ng klaseng tao ang gagawa ng ganun?

“She’s not a f cking guinea pig!” Sigaw ko na nauwi sa paos na tinig.

“You being feisty is much better,” sagot niya.

“Where is she? How is she?” Tanong ko. There was an urgency in my voice.

“She’s in the lab. Up for another experiment. You know we had some limited proximity in controlling minds with Elixir of Life. And we’re trying to reach at least a whole campus. But frankly, I don’t think your friend could make it anymore. She’s kinda weak and used. That’s a shame---” pinutol ko na ang iba niyang sasabihin dahil hindi ito maatim ng utak ko.

“Dalhin mo ako sa kanya. Stop whatever you’re doing to her!”

“And why should we?” Tanong nito.

“Because she might die! Just take me to her.” Why can’t they just let me see her?! I don’t want to think of the worst. I’ve seen so much death. And Mirden, like Lawrence and probably like Tres’ mother, is one of those people who did not deserve to suffer. Not like me.

Sandaling nag-isip ang naka-maskarang pinuno at saka sumagot. “Do you really wanna save her?” Tanong nito.

I grudgingly rolled my eyes on him. “Of course! You asshole!” Sigaw ko. He’s an idiot.

“Take her place.” Kampante nitong wika na ikinalaki ng mata ko.

“What?!” Bulalas ko.

“Take her place. Be a substitute for her,” wika niya. Gustong marindi ng utak ko sa narinig.

“Substitute? Is that a euphemism for ‘human tester’? How subtle,” sarkastiko kong sagot.

“Whatever it is, Miss Leondale. Iyon lang ang tanging paraan para makita mo ang kaibigan mo,” wika nito at saka tumalikod.

Mirden was dying. She was on the verge of death. And I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let her die especially now that I know that there is a chance to save her. I might have easily succumbed to death right there and then from Tres’ hands pero may isa pa akong misyon. At bilang maliit na redemption, tutuparin ko ang misyong iyon. Bago ko man lang tuluyang hayaan si Kamatayan na pagbayarin ako, babawiin ko si Mirden. I might not see her to safety bilang mukhang mauubos ang natitirang oras ko sa lab experiments nila pero aasa ako na parating na ang tulong para kina Mirden at Tres mula kay Detective Penber o maski man lang kay Van na tiyak namang babawiin ang halimaw niyang kapatid. That was enough for me.

“Wait!” Wika ko. Napahinto ang pinuno sa pagsara ng pinto at saka nagtatanong akong tiningnan.

“Kung gagawin ko ang gusto niyo, makakasiguro ba akong magiging ligtas na si Mirden?” Tanong ko. Sandali siyang tumahimik.

“Alright. She will be safe. Kasama namin siyang palalayain sa trade sa mga Freniere,” sagot niya matapos ang ilang sandali.

“Bring me to Mirden. I’ll take her place,” wika ko na ikinailing ni Tres.

“Stupid sacrifices,” bulong ni Tres na umabot sa aking pandinig.

Sumenyas ang pinuno sa mga kasama at saka lumapit sa akin ang mga ito. Tinanggal nila ang tali sa aking mga paa at saka ako pinalakad. My leg is still aching so they let me take my time. Sinulyapan ko sa huling sandali si Tres bago puminid ang pinto. I knew he might have loved to kill me but maybe he’s not my punishment from Death.

“I know that you’ll say yes the moment I asked you,” komento ng pinuno habang naglalakad kami.

Gusto kong tawanan ang sitwasyon at kinalabasan. Nag-isip pa naman ako bago gawin ang desisyong ito. Ayokong mamatay sa masakit na paraan but

who am I to choose how Death will come? I should have known that I don’t really have a talent on decision-making. I should not have wasted time on thinking. Maybe my best talent really was following my instincts.

“Maybe I’m fascinated with hilarious stupid things like experiments and mad scientists,” sagot ko.

With one deep breathe, nagbigay ako ng tahimik na paghingi ng tawad para kay Lawrence. At kay Autumn. And now, my punishment takes place.

[23] Chapter 23: Unmasked

Chapter 23: Unmasked

The place was all white. The smell of sterilized alcohol, the vague hint of chemicals and the busy people in white laboratory gowns filled the room. Subalit hindi ang mga iyon ang pumukaw ng aking atensyon kundi ang kaawa-awang nilalang na nakakulong sa isang malaking bubog na kahon. Nakatingin sa kawalan, maputla, bagsak ang pangangatawan at nangingitim ang gilid ng mapupulang mga mata. She seemed lifeless but I knew from the shallow heaving of her chest that she was still alive. She fixed her eyes on me when we stopped at her glass cage.

Sinenyasan ng pinuno ang isa sa mga naka-laboratory gown. Awtomatiko namang lumapit ito at may tinype sa pinaka-malapit na computer set. Bumaba ang apat na glass walls na nagkukulong sa nakasalampak na nilalang sa sahig.

“Summer…” Nabasa ko sa ibinuka ng bibig niya. Hindi ako gumawa ng kahit na anong reaksyon. Tiningnan ko lang siya. Kinuha ng pinuno ang atensyon ng lahat ng taong naroroon.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to welcome our beautiful new subject for our experiments on the elixir of life: Summer Leondale. Stronger than our previous human tester here.” Bumaling siya sa isa sa mga kasama niyang goons.

“Get that one out of the box. Put her inside another room,” wika niya bago hinarap ang taong nagbukas ng glass cage. “Prepare this girl,” utos niya at saka iniwan ako sa limang taong naka-laboratory mask and gown. It was really creepy to have this people around you. You’ll never know what they’ll do to you. F ck Science!

I felt the vague sting of a needle on my arm. Kumpara sa nararamdaman kong sakit sa sugat sa aking binti ay wala itong binatbat. They pushed me inside the big glass cage at inihiga ako sa white bed na nasa gitna. They took me out of my ball gown at isinuot sa akin ang isang puting duster or whatever they call it. Sa buong prosesong iyon ay hindi ako nagbitaw ng salita. I just really hoped that Mirden would be fine. Mapapahinga na siya sa lahat ng experiments at drogang ibinigay sa kaniya. I wished that I had given her enough time to recover. And as for me… gusto ko na lang magpasalamat sa mabigat na antok na pilit nagsasara sa talukap ng aking mga mata. Nagpadala ako sa sensasyon hanggang sa tuluyan na akong lamunin ng kadiliman at kawalan.

I inhaled deeply. I suddenly felt the need to breathe in. I was suffocating. I was alive. And suffocating. My head seemed as if it could burst any moment. I opened my eyes. Subalit hindi tiyak ang nakikita ko. Gusto kong iluwa ang eyeballs ko upang maka-aninag ng kahit na anong kulay maliban sa puti.

“Regular heartbeat…”

“Pulse rate…”

“She might die…”

Puro mga boses na tila nasa malayo ang nadidinig ko. Some of them sounded like continuous buzz in my ears. Iilan lang ang naiintindihan ko.

“Try to revive her…”

“She’s perfect for this!”

“We don’t need any other substitute…” I can’t feel anything subalit bakit tila nagkakalasan ang lahat ng buto ko sa katawan? I felt like I was being forced to move out of my own will and I was moving and doing something, but I have no knowledge of whatever it was.

“Mind… control…”

“Waking…”

“There are miscalculations! Calm her down!” Naririnig kong muli ang mga boses ngunit tila nagmamadali sila ngayon. Where are they? Why are they just mere voices? And why is the light so blinding? Why can’t I talk? Just then, I felt electricity ran through my body. Then sudden numbness. And then a flood of colors. Napapalibutan ako ng mga taong naka-lab gown. Meron ding mga nakamaskara.

“Natatanaw ko na ang success ng project na ito.”

Who the hell are they? Why was my f cking head f cking aching?

“Summer Leondale, you are really a strong person. Glad you’re still alive. I hope you can make it until the end,” wika ng isa.

Until the end? Alive? Kaunting lumiwanag ang isip ko. Oh, yeah. Ugh. I was a captive and held for an experiment. Like some freaking poor mice. That was a really nice, bloody way of uplifting my hopeless soul.

“But, Sir. We found some flaws in here…” Hindi tinuloy ng nagsalita ang mga nais pa sana niyang sabihin sapagkat pinahinto siya ng taong nakamaskara. I looked at my fingers instinctively dahil sa matingkad na kulay na nakabahid dito. Pula… malapot na pula. I wasn’t that dumb to not know that it was blood. But hell. Why do I have blood all over my right hand? Saka ko lang napansin ang puno ng malalim na kalmot kong pulso.

“Strong human. Never thought you got that great emotion to commit suicide instead of doing something against your wishes but you were told to do.” Huh? So I did this to myself? Pero bakit hindi ko alam? Uh. Elixir of

life. And I was their tester right now. A human experiment. And I wasn't forced. I volunteeed myself.

Sobra akong nanghihina at wala na akong nagawa nang bigyan ng lunas ng isa sa mga naroon ang sugatan kong pulso at linisin ang duguan kong kamay. They were keeping me clean and handy. Like a freaking rabbit in its cage. Humakbang sila ng ilang metro palayo sa akin at unti-unting umangat ang apat ng makakapal na glass wall, limiting my life… prisoning me in a four-corner world. I just laid on the white bed at the center of the glass cage. I couldn't speak nor move. I was definitely a picture of someone waiting Death's claim. Here was a girl who had better died. Yeah, I should be dead after what happened to Lawrence…

Ni hindi ko maalala kung paano ko pinagpatuloy at hinarap ang mundo matapos ang pangyayaring yun. At ngayong bumalik lahat ng sakit, lahat ng pagsisisi, lahat ng lungkot, hindi ko na naman alam kung paano sumulong. Lumipas ang mahabang oras na nakatitig lang ako sa kawalan. Nakikita ko mula sa sulok ng aking mga mata ang aktibidad sa paligid. Abala ang lahat. Hanggang kailan ba sila gagawa? Nasa tamang linya pa ba ang utak ko o nababaliw na ako?

Bahagyang gumuhit ang ngiti sa aking mga labi dahil sa naisip ko. Ang tanging bagay lang na nagpapatunay na normal pa ang aking pag-iisip ay ang pagkuwestiyon ko sa aking sariling katinuan. Meron bang baliw nagtatanong kung nababaliw na siya?

Pero hindi ba't halos mabaliw ako nang mawala si Lawrence? They told me I was just in denial. That I was in shock. No one thought I was already dead inside. And now, if Death would just be kind to me, then I might finally see Lawrence. Yes, I will see him again and then I will say sorry.

Naramdaman ko ang mahapding pag-init ng aking mga mata. Even crying, the only thing I was capable of at the moment, seemed so hard. Ni hindi ko nga alam kung meron pa ba akong sapat na tubig sa katawan upang umiyak. Naramdaman ko ang pag-agos ng likidong gumuhit sa pisngi ko. Posible kayang dugo na ang iniluluha ko?

Ibinuka ko ang aking tuyo’t na mga labi at umusal ng ‘Sorry.’ Subalit pinagkaitan yata ako maski ng boses ko at wala man lang akong narinig na tunog na dulot ng ginawa ko. Paulit-ulit kong sinubukan. Labing-isa, labing dalawa… At sa pang labing tatlong pagtatangka ay narinig ko ang sarili kong nagpakawala ng garalgal na tinig.

“Sor— ri—” Paulit-ulit ko pa yung ginawa hanggang makuha ko ang tamang ‘Sorry.’

Bunga niyon ay tila inilabas ng aking mga mata ang lahat ng likido ko sa katawan. I was a dying person, full of regrets. Full of sins. Hopeless.

“Sorry…” Palakas ng palakas ang naging hagulgol ko habang sinasabi ko ang nag-iisang salitang iyon. Para akong tanga na walang ibang kayang gawin kundi ang umiyak at walang ibang laman ang bokabularyo kundi ang salitang ‘sorry.’ Hindi ko na rin naramdaman na muling bumukas ang aking kulungan at pumasok na pala ang tatlong naka-lab gown.

“Stop that creepy wailing,” wika ng isang lalaki at saka may itinusok sa aking braso. It hurt… physical pain na walang kwenta sa emosyonal na pagdurusa ko ngayon. Gusto kong sigawan ang mga taong nasa paligid ko subalit hindi ko magawa. Patuloy lang ako sa walang kwentang paghingi ng tawad. Naramdaman ko ang bahagyang paghawak ng isa sa mga naroon sa aking kanang kamay. It was the most gentle thing that I felt these last few hours.

“Don’t be so rude to the girl! We are not animals.” Bagamat may mask ang bibig ay naramdaman ko ang katatagan ng boses niya. And I was sure, using all the functional neurons of my brain, that this one was a woman.

Threatened. Iyon ang sabi ni Tres patungkol sa pagkakaroon ng magagaling na chemist, doctors, scientists, at researchers ng misteryosong organisasyon na ito. Probably some of them were just forced and coerced to do this crap. After all, sino nga ba namang taong nasa matinong pag-uutak ang kusang gagawa ng ganitong mga bagay?

“Be soft and those bastards will make it harder for you,” ganti ng nauna. Nakita kong naglabas siya ng syringe na naglalaman ng kakarampot na asul

na likido. Itinusok niya iyon sa aking braso kasabay ng pagkabit ng babae ng kung ano sa magkabila kong sentido.

“We don’t really have choice. Kapag naperpekto namin ito, magiging normal at maayos na ang lahat,” mahinang wika ng babae. Somehow, I doubt that. Paanong magiging maayos ang lahat? How can they fix everything that this could break? Naramdaman ko ang unti-unting paglalaho ng paligid. Tila kumakalas sa akin ang aking katinuan at ang reyalidad. Parang tumatakas ang aking kaluluwa upang maging malaya. It was a wonderful feeling. Senseless but wonderful. But then, eveything turned darker and darker and painful. Masyadong masakit ang ulo ko. Nanunuot sa bungo ko ang kirot. I felt like I wanted to explode. I wanted to cut my head from my body. I wanted to shut down my unresponding nervous system. What is happening? Am I going to die? Can I just die fast and easy because this one was way too hard?

“She’s responding…”

“Keep her moving…”

Parang ume-echo iyon sa aking pandinig. And I get this vague and slightest feeling that I was moving. I was doing something, kahit na I didn’t want to. It’s like there’s some string forcing me to—

And then I suddenly remembered my regrets, pain and all the negative feelings that were continuously consuming me. Naramdaman kong tumigil rin ako sa pagkilos.

“S-sorry…” Narinig kong muli ang garalgal kong boses at paulit-ulit iyon. Parang humihingi ako ng kapatawaran sa lahat ng kasalan ng mga tao sa mundo.

“Emotions… so strong…” Naririnig kong wika ng ibang boses.

“Stop her…” Mga boses muli. Nasaan ba sila? Ano bang nangyayari? Tumitriple na ang nararamdaman kong sakit sa aking ulo. Pinamanhid nito ang buo kong katawan. Sumentro ang lahat ng sakit sa aking ulo at nagpakawala ako ng malakas na sigaw.

“Aaarrrrgggghh!” Narindi na rin ako sa sarili kong boses. Malamang na narindi na rin ang mga nagmamay-ari ng iba pang boses kaya pinatigil nila ang lahat. Lahat. Wala na ang sakit. Wala na ang lahat. Wala na akong kahit na anong maramdaman.

Lutang pa ang pakiramdam ko subalit unti-unti na ring lumilinaw ang aking paligid. Tatlong pares ng mga mata ang nakatunghay sa akin. They seemed to be weary and anxious subalit hindi ko sila pinansin. Itinigil ko na rin ang pag-usal ng ‘sorry.’ All I was feeling was fatigue. I was so tired to say even that single word. I was tired of crying. I sat there staring at nothing and waiting… waiting for some hour glass to drain their sand. Waiting to die. It was such a tragic way to end everything. But hey, I never really liked happy endings.

And then something… violent… happened.

An explosion. A terrible, loud, scandalous and violent explosion shook the place. It paralyzed my drifiting eyes. It was like I was crossing the bridge towards death and then the bridge broke down and shattered before I even got to the end. Nagkagulo ang paligid at yumanig ang lupa dahil sa lakas ng pagsabog. Ilang saglit lang ay mag-isa na akong muli sa class cage at napapalibutan ng mga nagkakagulong tao na pulos nakasuot ng puti. I watched them as they come and go and stumbled. Unti-uting rumehistro sa paralisado kong isip ang dahilang ng kanilang kaguluhan— mga nakaririnding putok ng baril.

Probably Detective Penber. The contingency plan. He’s coming to save Mirden.

Pabalyang bumukas ang pinto ng kwartong iyon at pinanuod ko ang agresibong pagpasok ng pinuno na suot pa rin ang maskara. Tinutukan niya ng baril ang lahat ng taong naroroon. Gumaya rin ang apat niya pang kasama na mga nakamaskara rin habang may pinapagawa siya sa mga tao sa paligid niya. Nagsimulang magligpit at mag-impake ng equipments, chemicals at bottled products ang mga taong nakaputi. Nataranta ang lahat nang muling bumukas ng pabalya ang pinto at pumasok ang isang… isang halimaw. Mukha siyang pamilyar… He was with us, with Lawrence and me on that imaginary grand ball.

That f cking devil.

What the hell is he doing here?! Sa kabila ng kahinaan ng aking katawan ay unti-unting bumalik sa normal ang aking mental na katayuan. But I was still troubled emotionally that I could do nothing kahit anong recover pa ng katawan ko ang maganap. I watched him as he charged decidedly inside the laboratory room. He looked so… maniacally angry. And God! He was even in a f cking elegant tuxedo holding a--- What?! Is he holding an A-12 Atchisson Assault Shotgun?

One of the masked men shot at him and I almost shouted a warning which only resulted in a croak. But he was fast. Parang inaasahan na niyang gagawin iyon sa kaniya. Bilang ganti ay itinutok niya rito ang dalang armas at sinimulan itong ratratin. Crap! Is he going to eliminate everyone here? That weapon could do 300 rounds in a freaking minute. He could take down everyone here in less than 30 seconds! Don't ask me how I even know that! Nakapagtago ang kaawa-awang taong iyon subalit ilang bala rin yata ang bumaon sa braso niya.

Pero ang pumukaw ng pansin ko ay ang nakakapangilabot na ngiti sa mga labi ng demonyong iyon habang pinauulanan ng bala ang buong lugar. Dumapa ang lahat sa takot na lamunin ng makapangyarihang armas ang kanilang katawan. The Evil Prince looked like a maniac with a happy penchant for killing. Akala ko noon, nakakatakot na ang madidilim niyang banta. But this was way scary. Nababaliw na siya! Mas nababaliw siya kaysa sa akin!

Naalala ko ang tanging matinong usapan namin ni Tres. So was this what he was talking about? The Devil without his mask? He was frightening. Nakakatakot ang nilalang na ito. Palang wala nang rason pang makakapasok sa utak niya. Magiging katawa-tawa ang ginagawa ng Elixir of Life kumpara sa attitude niya. Nagkalat ang shells ng bala sa sahig at naubos ang karga ng kanyang combat shotgun. Pero sa halip na muli itong kargahan ay itinapon niya ito sa sahig. Ano ba sa tingin niya ang ginagawa niya?!

Lumabas sa kaniyang pinagtataguan ang pinuno nang magdaan ang ilang segundong nakatayo lang ang nakakatakot na nilalang na dumating.

Mayroon siyang sinabi na hindi ko naintindihan at saka tumingin sa direksyon ko.

The Devil fixed his gaze on me at dagling nawala ang nakapangingilabot na ngiti sa kaniyang labi. Instead, his eyes looked dark. He suddenly walked towards me at nagulat ako nang suntukin niya ang pader na salamin. It was a hard blow, I could tell but it didn't break through. Paulit-ulit niyang sinuntok ang pader subalit wala pa ring nangyayari. Ni hindi ko napansin that I was screaming at him to stop it. Gusto kong lumapit sa kaniya pero natigil ako nang mag-angat siya ng paningin. His eyes knocked me breathless. Nakikita ko na ang galit at iba pang hindi ko matukoy na emosyon sa kaniyang mga mata. How could he be so stupid?! Nakita kong ngumiti ng nakakaloko ang pinunong nakamaskara at sinenyasan ang isa sa mga tauhan niya. I watched with wide eyes nang tutukan si Van ng baril ng tatlong iba pang nakamaskara. Mukha namang nabasa ni Van ang iniisip ko kaya nilingon niya ang grupo. Tumakbo si Van sa ibang direksyon. I don't know how he did that but suddenly, he was behind them, torturing and breaking them. He was really a beast with multiple dangerous personality and there wasn't anything scarier than that.

Subalit biglang umilaw ang screen na nasa loob ng aking glass cage. Sa malalaking pulang letra ay nakasulat ang Nitogen Asphyxiation. Bahagya ko lang napansin ang paglayo ng nakamaskarang pinuno sa pinakamalapit na desktop sa aking kulungan. Stupid Van Freniere! Hindi ba niya napag-aralan na computer makes life easier kesa sa durugin niya ang kamao niya kasusuntok sa matibay na pader? Unti-unting nagkaroon ng puting usok sa loob ng glass cage. And little by little, I felt suffocated. I know that I was bound to die. I was actually ready and waiting for it. Maski ang pagdating ni Van ay hindi nagpabago noon. But now, I wonder what was taking death so long? And this suffocation would torture me for three minutes before I lose all oxygen and finally die.

I coughed between deep breaths as if struggling for air, struggling to live. Napaisip ako ng mapait. I even had energy left to cough! Ang buhay ko nga naman. Mamamatay na nga lang ako, ang dami pang drama. Naramdaman ko ang pagbagsak ko sa sahig. Kasabay nun ay ang ingay sa pader sa aking

harapan. I saw the devil on his killing frenzy state, smashing the body of a bloody person with a broken mask. He must be the leader.

Hindi ko alam kung ilang minuto na ang lumilipas but breathing became a torture. Nabahiran na ng dugo ang glass wall. Wala pa ring tigil ang halimaw sa labas sa pagtatangka niyang basagin ang pader. Kinuha niya ang isang shotgun na malapit sa kanya at sunud-sunod itong inihampas sa glasswall sa pagtatangka na mabasag iyon. Subalit wala pa ring nangyari. If I could just roll my eyes at him and tell him how stupid he was being right now, I would. Can't he just stop? Binitiwan niya ang armas at kinuha ang duguang lalaki. It was a wonder why he was still alive. Nakita ko ang pagmamakaawa sa mukha nito. Nakatulala lang sa senaryo ang ibang mga taong nakasuot ng lab gown na naroon pa at tila takot na takot na gumalaw o kahit man lang huminga. Natatakot na baka kapag sinubukan nilang tumakas ay ipampalit sila sa kaawa-awang pinuno nila. Alam nilang kaunting galaw nila ay mapapansin ng halimaw na pili bumabasag sa aking kulungan. Ni hindi ko nga alam kung gusto niya ba akong patayin sa sarili niyang mga kamay kaya gustung-gusto niyang makalapit sa akin.

I knew it was close to three minutes now. My eyes were slowly drifting at mangilan-ngilan na lang ang pinapakawalang tibok ng puso ko. Choked to death through nitrogen. Mukhang pinaparusahan ako ng chemistry dahil sa pagwawalang-bahala ko sa subject na yun, ah. I couldn't breathe anymore.

And then I saw Detective Penber… It was vague, or maybe an illusion pero nakita ko ang kaniyang pagkagulat sa pinagkakaabalahan ni Van. And as I was losing consciousness, I saw him running towards my direction, shouting things over to the devil which I couldn't understand. Then he ran to the computer. I closed my eyes and slowly gave up.

Subalit tila may tumangay sa aking katawan. Hell, I wasn't dead yet. But I could feel the hollowness of my chest… And I could still fell things. I felt a pressure pushing on my chest. Like it was urging my heart to pump. It was urging me to breathe in but I couldn't. There wasn't anything to breathe in.

Then I felt a hand cupped my chin and something soft crashed against my lips. A rush of air through my mouth.. and I inhaled… deeply…

“F ck, Summer! You f cking need to open your f cking eyes!” I heard his voice— frantic but whole— cursed. Something soft crashed against my lips again and another rush of air came in. After inhaling, bahagya kong ini-stretch ang labi ko para sa isang tipid na ngiti. At saka dahan-dahang iminulat ang aking mga mata. I was on the floor, outside my glass cage. And I was being held by the scariest devil that ever existed in the world. I just looked into the depths of his dark eyes and strangely, I knew I was safe.

“Y-you’re alive…” Bulong niya. His gaze was still wild, and full of bloodlust. Tiningnan niya ako ng matagal, tila inirerehistro sa kaniyang utak ang aking kabuuan. Pale-white face, reddish eyes with dark circles under, injured leg, bandaged wrist… He lifted me on his arms and put his forehead against mine. Pumikit siya ng ilang segundo and I couldn’t help but do the same. Saka siya nag-angat ng tingin.

“Sunugin ninyo ang buong lugar,” wika niya sa seryoso at nakakatakot na tinig. Even I had goosebumps.

“Pero, Master Freniere, si Tres ay nasa kabilang building—” Naputol ang boses na iyon maglabas si Van ng isang maliit na revolver at itinutok iyon sa isa sa mga tauhan niya. Ngayon ko lang napansin na napapalibutan kami ng maraming lalaki na naka-pormal na suot. Freniere Mafia.

“Kung hindi mo kayang gawin ay wala ka palang silbi,” wika ni Van. Sukat doon ay tumakbo ang tauhan niya upang sundin ang kaniyang ipinag-uutos.

“Shit. Mirden’s still there,” narinig kong wika ni Detective Penber at saka tumakbo palabas ng laboratory room. Tumakbo na rin ang iba.

“And for the finale of this show..” Bumaling ang dulo ng baril ni Van sa duguang lalaki na takot na nakatingin sa amin.

“Hindi rito matatapos ang lahat. Mananagot kayo sa pinuno,” wika nito. May iba pang pinuno? Ikinasa ni Van ang baril. No, I don’t want to see another death. But how can I stop this unleashed devil? He’s not going to listen. But maybe I could risk this…

I leaned forward towards him. It was hard and painful but I had to try. He looked back at me and stiffened as I got closer. I felt the effect it had on him as I let my lips touch his cheek and whispered, “Don’t. Please.”

He pondered on it for a second and with a sigh, cursed, “F ck it!” And then he carried me on his arm as he walked out of that place— just as the fire started to eat it.

“You are so stupid,” I silently remarked.

His jaw clenched and he said, “Shut up.”

[24] Chapter 24: Storm’s Eye

Chapter 24: Storm’s Eye

Everything felt familiar. I had this feeling that this already happened before. I have on one of the most beautiful ball gown that I’ve ever seen. Part of my face was hidden by a creatively designed mask. Subalit nag-iisa lang ako sa gitna ng dance floor. Maganda ang pagkakaayos sa paligid. Tila isang engrandeng okasyon ang ginaganap subalit walang kahit isa mang bisita. Well, maliban sa akin. At nararamdaman ko ang bigat na pag-iisa. Masyadong malungkot ang paligid. Parang kay bigat sa pakiramdam. Tila gustong tumulo ng luha ko.

“Mahal na prinsesa.”

I snapped my head up. Lumingon ako sa paligid upang hanapin ang pinagmulan ng boses. Hindi ako maaaring magkamali sa nagmamay-ari niyon.

“Nasaan ka?” Isinatinig ko. I looked everywhere to find the owner of that voice. Subalit bigo ako. Walang kahit na sino sa lugar na ito.

“Mahal na prinsesa.”

Muli akong naalerto. Tumakbo ako tungo sa madilim na sulok para lang matagpuan ang sarili ko na papalapit lang sa pinanggalingan ko, sa gitna ng dance floor. What the hell is this? Muli kong inulit ang pagtakbo. Sa

puntong ito, hindi lang para hanapin ang may-ari ng boses kundi para na rin takasan ang lugar na kinalalagyan ko. Gusto kong lumayo rito. Kahit gaano pa kaganda ang paligid ay hindi ko nanaising magtagal pa rito. Masyadong malungkot. Masyadong mabigat sa pakiramdam ang paligid. Subalit, nararamdaman ko na ang pagod ay hindi ko pa rin makita ang labasan. Paulit-ulit pa rin akong bumabalik sa gitna ng kawalan.

Pasalampak kong ibinagsak ang katawan ko sa sahig dahil sa pagod. Di kalaunan ay tuluyan naman akong binalot ng labis na kalungkutan. Ilang sandali lang ang nakalipas ay nakarinig ako ng mga yabag papalapit sa kinaroroonan ko. Hindi ako nag-angat ng paningin at hinintay na lang ang tuluyang paglapit niyon sa akin.

“Mahal na prinsesa.” Narinig kong wika ng nagmamay-ari ng yabag. Dahan-dahan akong nag-angat ng paningin. Kahit pilit ko siyang hinahanap kanina, na-realize ko ngayon na hindi ko alam kung handa ba akong makita ang taong ito.

“Lawrence,” mahina kong naisatinig nang magtama ang aming paningin.

“We meet again,” nakangiti niyang wika. Napakagwapo talaga ng mukha niya. Pero ang nakapansin ng atensyon ko ay ang sinabi niya. Nagkita kaming muli?

“We did?” Kunot-noong tanong ko.

“Palagi kitang pinagmamasdan. Subalit ngayon lang tayo muling nagkita,” sagot niya.

“You watch me?” Tanong kong muli.

“I will always look over you,” nakangiti niyang sabi.

Malungkot na ngiti ang isinagot ko sa kaniya. “I don’t deserve it.” Hindi ko alam kung bakit narito sa harap ko ngayon si Lawrence. Wala rin akong ideya tungkol sa tinutukoy niyang huli naming pagkikita.

“You deserve everything that’s wonderful,” he said.

“But why couldn’t I have you?” Naramdaman ko ang pamumuo ng luha ko sa aking mga mata. Huminga siya ng malalim at saka lumuhod sa harap ko. Now we were both on the floor and facing each other. I was a little scared that he would be able to see the tears I was trying to stop from falling.

“You always had me. It’s just that, we can’t have each other the way you wanted. We deserve people who are meant for us. But, you are always my princess,” wika niya.

“But I want you! Ikaw ang gusto ko!” There was a little hint of hysteria on my voice. Hinawakan niya ako sa pisngi. His hand was cold but like before, the way it felt can always calm me.

“There is someone who is bound to protect you. It’s best for you to be with that person,” nakangiti niya pa ring wika. Gusto kong malungkot at gusto ko ring magalit sa kaniya. Bakit ganito na lang kadali ang lahat? Ganon ba ka-imposible para sa amin?

“It’s best for me to be with you. Sasama ako sa iyo,” giit ko.

Umiling siya. “Hindi pwede. Kailangan mong magpatuloy. Ayokong itigil mo ang mundo mo para sa akin. Matagal nang huminto ang daigdig ko at lahat ng bagay na hindi ko nagawa ay ibinigay ko na sa nakaraan. Tanging ang mga salitang sasabihin ko na lang sa iyo ang pinanghahawakan ko.” Tila lumungkot ang maliwanag niyang mukha. Parang ang sakit sa loob na makita siyang malungkot. I always see him as a happy, strong person. I never thought he can be like this. I never thought we would end up this way, sharing hurtful loneliness.

“Hindi ba talaga tayo pwede?” Mahina kong tanong. Bakas ang pagsuko sa boses ko. Umiling siyang muli. Bawat pag-iling niya ay lumalabo ang posibilidad na bumalik pa kami sa nakaraan.

Huminga ako ng malalim. “Kung ano man ang sasabihin mo, makikinig ako.” This way, I was sure he would ask me to let him go. He will ask me to forget the past. At kapag hiniling niya iyon ay kakailanganin kong magdesisyon.

“Ikaw at ako, kailanman ay hindi na muling magtatagpo. Buksan mo ang mga mata mo, Summer. You will find that there’s an existing world quite different from the past. Kailangan mong harapin ang mundo nang wala ako. Hindi na kita kayang protektahan gaya ng dati. At isa pa, nasaktan na kita.” Umiling siya. “I won’t ask you to forget me but I want you to live your life.”

Pilit kong binuksan ang utak ko habang nakatingin sa mga mata niya. Always honest and genuine. Pero hindi ko naiintindihan kung bakit ganoon lang kadali sa kaniya na sabihin sa akin ang mga bagay na ito.

“Kahit kalian ba, hindi ako naging mahalaga sa’yo?” Pigil ang luha kong tanong. I felt like the old Summer, the one who’s easy to cry. The old Summer who’s afraid of rejection. Tinawanan niya ang tanong ko.

“If giving my life to protect you means you’re not important to me then isn’t that a waste?”

“I’m sorry I killed you,” wika ko.

“No, you didn’t. I saved you. And I don’t regret that. If the same thing happens again and again, hindi ako magdadalawang isip. I will still save you. Paulit-ulit matatapos ang buhay ko dahil ganun ka kahalaga sa akin,” seryoso niyang wika na tuluyan nang ikinalaglag ng luha ko. Hindi ako makapaniwalang maririnig ko ang mga salitang ito.

“Just live, Summer. If you won’t live for yourself then at least think of me. Live for the life I had thrown away to keep yours. I died young but at least I had great memories to keep and those are with you. So please, live.” Pinahid niya ang patuloy na pagtulo ng luha ko. Hindi ko alam kung anong damdamin ang unang bumalot sa akin. Relief? Happiness? Now, everything is crystal clear. He showed me the sense of it and I felt free. Ano pa nga bang inaasahan ko? He’s Lawrence. Sa kanya lang ako nakikinig. And this time, he opened my half-closed eyes and half-dead life. I don’t know how he does that but it happens, always.

“C-can… Can I hug you? Please?” Tanong ko. He smiled and pulled me gently against his chest. “Can I still be your princess?” Muli kong tanong.

Hinigpitan niya ang yakap sa akin at ganoon din ako sa kanya.

“Of course, Summer. You will always be my princess,” sagot niya.

Pinilit kong ngumiti. I was sure this was goodbye. “I missed you, Lawrence,” wika ko.

“I missed you more.” Sandaling katahimikan ang lumipas at muli niyang sinambit ang pangalan ko. “Summer,” aniya.

“Hmmm?” Tanong ko.

“Your sister loves you. Remember that.”

Ngumiti ako at saka sumagot. “I know. She always does.” And then everything faded to nothing.

“Uh! Kelan ka ba magigising, Snow White? Alam mo bang hinahanap ka na ng buong mundo?”

Pamilyar sa akin ang tinig na iyon. Subalit pinili kong ipagpatuloy kung anuman ang ginagawa ko. Siguro ay natutulog ako. Napakakumportable ng pakiramdam ko. Ito ang pinakakumportableng sitwasyong naranasan ko nitong mga nakaraang araw.

“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. I would be willing to kiss you, though.” Wikang muli ng pamilyar na tinig. Iminulat ko ang aking mga mata at nabungaran ko ang gwapong mukha ng nagmamay-ari ng boses.

“I’m actually waiting for it,” mahina kong sagot. Nanunuyo ang lalamunan ko. Ang hirap yatang magsalita.

He smirked at my response. “Really?” Tanong niya.

“Yeah.” I urged him to come closer. He leaned towards me and I watched as his face moved closer to mine. Nung ilang space na lang ang pagitan ng mga mukha naming dalawa, umangat ang kaliwang kamay ko at malakas na dumapo iyon sa kaniyang mukha.

“Ah!!! Not the face!” Daing niya habang sapo ang mukha.

“What made you think that I would let you kiss me, moron?!” Tanong ko sa walang ibang pangahas kundi si Makki Sison. I looked around me and realized immediately where I was.

“Well, I thought you had a change of heart!” Angal niya. “Never thought you still got enough strength to harm my perfect face.” Tuluyan siyang ngumiti. He actually glows when he smiles genuinely. “Ano’ng nararamdaman mo? Tatawag ako ng nurse, or doctor or-”

“Shut up, Makki,” putol ko sa kaniya.

“Seriously, cute girl. Okay ka lang?” Seryoso niyang tanong. I rolled my eyes at him. I still felt weak and in pain but I’m okay. I’ve never felt any better in my life.

“Gusto mo bang subukan ko ulit sa mukha mo kung okay lang ako?” Tanong ko.

Umiling siya. “No, thanks. You’re really back and I have enough evidence,” nakangiwi niyang sabi. Inabutan niya akong ng isang basong tubig. “You must be thirsty.” Kinuha ko iyon at uminom.

“Nasaan ang lahat?” Muli kong tanong habang inililibot ang paningin ko sa paligid. Well, specifically, sino’ng lahat ba ang tinatanong ko? Didn’t I push everyone away from me?

“Well, unfortunately, they’re not here..” Sagot niya. Yeah, I noticed that, that was why I asked. Besides, of all the least expected people, bakit si Makki ang narito ngayon? I was just about to answer him with a snarky remark nang magpatuloy siya sa pagsasalita.

“Mirden Montgomery is in another hospital, guarded by her weird parents. Your fake, bastard of a boyfriend-that would be Cast-and poor little Tyler and that chic friend of yours are in the hallway, getting their medals for overreaction.” Pumalatak siya. “Bakit ba ang O.A. ng mga tao ngayon? Even the doctors, ang sabi ay you’re still weak and fragile at

nangangailangan ng matinding pag-iingat. Well, mukha namang may point ang pag-iingat. Dapat talaga ay nag-ingat ako nang lumapit ako sa'yo kanina," wika ni Makki at sinapo muli ang mukha niya.

Nakahinga ako ng maluwag nang marinig ko ang tungkol kay Mirden. That's good. At least she's safe now. Gusto ko rin sanang itanong kung anong nangyari kay Tres. Mirden wasn't burned to death. Nakaligtas rin ba siya? Despite the tragedy that happened, I could still remember everything. Some parts were vague dahil sa Elixir of Life but the others are crystal clear. Knowing that Satanic Tres, I bet ginamit niya to his advantage ang apoy para makalabas. He probably made it through the fire without sweat.

"So, why the hell are you here then?" Tanong ko kay Makki.

"Dahil hindi ako nagpanic. I reacted like a normal person." Gusto ko sanang isagot sa kaniya na ang normal na tao, magpapanic kapag may ibang naospital pero nagpatuloy siya sa pagsasalita. "I wasn't like that Jin who screamed out, "Does she need blood transfusion?!! Take mine now! Kahit ubusin niyo ang dugo ko at ibigay sa kaniya!" Seriously? He kept pestering the doctors, it's stupid. Do you even have the same blood type?" He added with distaste. Hindi ko pa rin maintindihan kung bakit ang sasama ng panlasa ng Black Government sa Dark Monarch and vice versa.

Napailing naman ako. May mali talaga sa utak ni Jin Cast.

"By the way, you're family was here. Babalik sila maya-maya. And since you didn't have the normal patient line asking, 'Where am I? What happened? I'm scared of needles' and offered me instead with a fake kiss the moment you opened your eyes, I think I have to inform you that you're in a freaking hospital. And you should be really acting like a terribly weak patient." Patuloy niya sa mahabang litanya.

Bakit ba ang daldal ni Makki Sison? And crap! My perfect family is coming! Kailangan ko pang mag-isip ng sasabihin ko sa kanila. I can't wait. I'm so excited. Ugh!

"Nagugutom ka ba? We have food here. Oatmeal? Fruits? Milk?" Tanong ni Makki.

“Pizza will do,” mabilis kong sagot. Well, that was the most tempting offer that I received this day. And there was no way I’d turn that down. I was as hungry as a monster.

“Oh, but we don’t have pizza here. In-assume naming na hindi mo pa makakayanan ang hard foods. Pero since mapilit ka, I’ll just give Ethan a message na bumili on his way here.”

Ethan’s coming? Okay, what was all these weird things happening? Mas expected ko pa kung dalawin ako ni Sir Gueco at bigyan ng lecture about missing his math classes. That would be bloody and terrible, though. But Makki and Ethan? Black Government members visiting me? Suspicious.

“Spill it, Makki. What is happening?” I asked seriously.

He matched my seriousness and asked, “Ano’ng what’s happening?”

I rolled my eyes. Bukod sa naging napakadaldal niya ay mukhang nawalan na rin siya ng common sense. I really wonder why those girls are always buzzing around him.

“Well, I’m not expecting to be alive. But I’m not expecting visitors, as well. Higit sa lahat, bakit mukha mo ang una kong nakita sa pangalawang buhay ko?” Iritable kong tanong. Mukhang balewala naman sa kanyaang attitude ko dahil hindi nabura cocky expression niya.

“Is that so? Then I think it would be my honor to explain some things. Una, you are alive dahil siguro, maraming may gustong mabuhay ka. Pangalawa, you have visitors dahil siguro, maraming may crush sa’yo.” Inirapan ko siya. He just shrugged. “Pangatlo, hindi kita crush kaya nandito ako. It’s a family business. Pag-aari ng father ko ang ospital na ito. I’ll send you the bills.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Your intelligent and full of wisdom explanation is very enlightening,” sarkastikong komento ko.

He playfully bowed his head and said, “Thank you.”

I should have talked to myself or had him call the doctor instead. Bakit ba minsan ang hirap kausap ng mga gangster? Hindi na siya nagsalita muli at tinitigan lang ako.

“Bakit?” Kunot-noo kong tanong.

“Wala. Natutuwa lang ako na nandito ka. Akala namin…” Hindi niya idineretso kung ano man ang balak niyang sabihin. I have to admit, natutuwa rin ako na nandito ako. I smiled at him which shocked him. Di ko alam kung matatawa ba ako sa reaksiyon niya. Admittedly, I don’t smile that often. Hindi rin naman ako makapaniwalang natutuwa akong makita ang pagmumukha ni Makki.

“Are you sure na wala kang crush sa akin?” Nakangiti kong biro.

Agad siyang nakahuma at saka umiling. “Sorry, sweetie. You can’t have me. I could be a lot of things but I’m a loyal person,” wika niya.

“Loyal to all the girls?” Tanong ko.

“Hey, I’m just being friendly and polite,” depensa niya.

“Do you even know that the word for that is ‘flirting’?” Tanong kong muli.

“Flirting? It doesn’t ring a bell. Sorry,” sagot niya.

“You’re hopeless.” And what am I gonna expect from Makki Sison? Napailing na lang ako subalit sumeryoso na naman siya.

“I’m loyal and that’s the thing I’m proud of. If I’m not, then I wouldn’t have my friends. If I’m not, then I wouldn’t be patiently waiting for this girl to have her heart beat for me.”

I stared at him blankly. Did I just hear that from Makki Sison?

“So, who’s this girl?” I asked because I was curious.

“You don’t have to know her, sweetie. I still enjoy this forlorn, unrequited and non-existing love story between us.” Hindi ko na siya pinilit pang

magdagdag ng detalye.

I was about to throw another nonsensical question nang magbukas ang pinto. Napawi ang ngiti ko sa unang taong pumasok. Napangiwi ako sa ikalawa at maging sa ikatlo. They’re here. My family. They never fail to deliver a grand, breath-taking entrance kapag magkakasama sila. Nang mapansin ni Autumn na gising na ako, she went to me and held me.

“Good. You’re awake.” Dad and his powerful voice. “Do you have any idea what you got yourself into?” Malakas at galit niyang sabi. Tila naramdaman ni Makki na hindi niya kailangang makita ang eksenang ito kaya sumenyas siya sa akin bilang pamamaalam. Itinuon ko ang atensyon sa aking ama. There was an unspoken rule sa pamilya namin and that was to never get on the bad side of Samuel Leondale. My Mom beside him was nothing but worried. Na-guilty tuloy ako na hindi ko man lang naisip ang mararamdaman ni Mama pag napapahamak ako.

“I was on a party. Everything got out of control. And then I had an accident,” diretso ang tingin kong sagot. My Mom shook her head so was Autumn. Another family rule was, never make the father and the rebel daughter clash, which always happens anyway.

“You were almost killed! You should have known very well that it was suicide to try and rescue that girl on your own! Ano na naman ito? Is this your noble way to catch our attention? Do you want to change schools again?” Galit niyang sabi. Seriously, sa dagundong ng boses niya, nakakapagtaka na hindi pa lumilindol ngayon. Pinigilan ko namang ngumiwi. The truth saved me from lying, nag-effort pa’ko.

“Well, she’s pitiful!” I just said. Lalong dumilim ang mukha ni Daddy at umiling naman si Mama. “Sino bang nagsabi ng mga ito sa inyo?” Kalmado kong tanong.

“Detective Patrick Penber said that you went on a mission by yourself. Without consulting him. Ang sabi niya ay handa kang ibuwis ang buhay mo para sa isang kaibigan. He tried to stop you but you didn’t listen,” wika ni Mama na ikinatagis ng bagang ko, maski pa nabanaagan ko ng konting understanding ang boses niya nang sabihin niyang para sa kaibigan ang

ginawa ko. Still, what the f cking hell, Detective Penber! What a f cking liar! That bigtime prick! Hindi na lang ako sumagot. Abala na ang utak ko sa pagpaplano kung paano ko sisirain ang natitirang oras ng walang kwentang detective na yun sa mundo.

“Mabuti na lang at nailigtas kayo ni Detective Penber. I should remember to thank him,” wika ni Autumn na mas lalong ikinainit ng ulo ko. Sa lahat ng naririnig ko, may isang pangalan ang nawawala.

“Enough of that. You should know, Summer, that I’m getting your papers ready para makalipat ka na sa ibang school,” wika ni Daddy. Kumunot ang noo ko.

“Why?” I asked him.

“Isn’t this your way of saying you want to go someplace else this time? You got your wish, young lady. You’re transferring out of Montello High.” I didn’t react and Mama noticed.

“Gusto mo bang lumipat ng school, Summer?” Mama asked.

Napaisip ako. Was she asking because I have a choice this time? I could go to Arturia with Autumn. “No, I’m staying.”

They gave me a look as if I just did something weird. I looked back at the three of them.

“What?” I mouthed.

[25] Chapter 25: Calm and Quiet

Chapter 25: Calm and Quiet

I was back. I recovered fast. Ang tanging iniinda ko na lang ay ang sugat sa binti ko gawa ng hunting knife na malapit na rin namang gumaling. Nakaupo ako sa kamang ilang gabi kong hindi tinulugan. It didn’t get all bloody and hard with my family dahil na rin sa ikinagulat nilang mas pinili kong bumalik sa Montello High. Daddy was all suspicious of my decision but in the end, he relented and let me stay at Montello. He was definitely

running out of lists of schools. I just promised my Mom that I’m going home for Christmas and Autumn said she’ll visit me one of this days.

“I’m watching you, Summer,” banta sa akin ni Daddy kaninang nadischarge ako.

Mukhang nakuha ko ang buong atensiyon ni Dady ngayon. Considering na nagkaroon kami ng family gathering sa ospital kung saan ako ang star sa loob ng isang linggo. That never happens. The week was weird for me, too dahil paminsan-minsang dumadalaw si Jamie at Tyler sa akin. Jin was banned, though dahil sa overreaction niya. Lumingon ako sa paligid at nakita ko ang bakanteng kama ni Mirden. She was still in a coma at hindi pa rin nagigising.

“I missed her, too,” narinig kong wika ni Jamie na naghahanda nang pumasok. “Are you sure na kaya mo nang umattend ng klase?” Tanong niya.

“I missed solving Math problems. I’m so excited,” sarkastikong sagot ko as I dumped my notebooks in my bag. Ngumiti siya.

“You’re really back.”

Para akong bumalik sa simula habang naglalakad ako sa hallway. Lahat ng estudyante ay nakatingin sa direksyon ko. They even made way for me and it was freaking me out.

Someone grabbed my waist. My instinct kicked in and I elbowed that person in the stomach only to realize that I shouldn’t have done that. I should have punched his face instead.

“Ow! Bakit ba napakabayolente mo?” Daing ni Jin na walang nagawa kundi bawiin ang kamay niya mula sa aking beywang.

“I will always be violent with you, Jin Cast,” wika ko na hindi tumitigil sa paglalakad.

“Yeah, yeah. That’s just your way of being sweet to me. This time, it’s sweeter.” Pumreno ako sa paglalakad at hinarap si Jin.

“Anong kailangan mo?” Seryoso kong tanong.

“Well, I am just… I’m… Uh-” Kumunot ang nook o. Ano bang problema ng taong ito?

“Ganito, kapag nacompose mo na ang sasabihin mo, saka mo ako balikan,” wika ko at itinuloy ang paglalakad. Subalit nakakaisang hakbang pa lang ako ay bigla akong hinila ni Jin palapit sa kaniya at saka niyakap. Oh, crap!

“You, scandalous jerk!” Singhal ko habang itinutulak ang dibdib niya palayo. But his hug was so tight, I couldn’t even create a little space.

“Oh, hell. I’ve missed you!” Narinig kong wika niya.

I rolled my eyes at him. “God, Jin! You should have just printed my picture!” Sabi ko. He didn’t respond any witty comment. He just turned into a serious man hugging a girl.

“Jin…” I muttered but I was at lost to what to say next. Just like last time, hindi ko alam ang tamang paghandle sa ganitong sitwasyon.

“You should have brought me. Kung hindi mo maiwasang gumawa ng mga bagay na ikapapahamak mo, sana sinabi mo sa akin. I could have stayed with you, be with you. God! I had never been worried like that in my life! Don’t ever make me worry again.” Hindi ko siya maintindihan, just like last time he said something close to that. How could he care about me after everything? It doesn’t make any sense.

“And you could have died with me. Sa tingin mo ba makakatulong yun?” Seryoso kong sabi. Just like Mirden, I rallied against the thought of Jin’s death. Or maybe I just don’t want anyone to die because of my stupidity. Not again.

“That would be better than doing nothing. If you only learn how to listen.” I stopped fighting him at that moment. Listening. Kelan nga ba ako natutong

making. And here was another person teaching me the good things out of listening. Lumingon ako sa paligid. Nakukuha na naming ang atensyon ng lahat.

“Jin, we’re in the hallway and we’re making a pathetic scene,” mahina kong sabi.

He just chuckled. “Doesn’t matter. I’m your boyfriend,” presko niyang sagot. Seriously, he’s still saying that? Uh, pati si Makki yan na rin ang sinasabi. Mukhang kinakain na ng utak ng lahat ang kalokohan ni Jin Cast.

Kumilos ang aking mga kamay at natagpuan nito ang leeg ni Jin. I dugged my fingers on it until he flinched at luwagan ang pagkakayakap sa akin. “You’re an idiot!” Gigil kong wika. Natigil lang ang pagpaparusa ko kay Jin nang mapansin kong nagkaroon ng pagbabago sa aura ng paligid. Hindi na sa amin nakatuon ang atensyon ng lahat kundi sa grupong paparating.

Ang Black Government na pinangungunahan ni Van Freniere, Ethan Montreal at Makki Sison. Dire-diretso sila sa hallway tungo sa direksyon namin ni Jin. Well, nakahinto lang kami ni Jin sa gitna ng daanan at parehong walang balak na mag-give way. Jin let me go as the group approached and hold me close by my waist. Nagtama ang mga mata namin ni Van and… I blushed as I remembered what I did. Freaking bloody blush. Yan ang napapala ko sa paggawa ng bagay na hindi ko pinag-iisipan.

“Summer, kumusta ang pakiramdam mo?” Si Ethan ang kaswal na nagumpisa ng konbersasyon.

‘I’m… I’m pissed off,” sagot ko na ikinangiti ni Makki. Inirapan ko siya. That jerk. Walang dumating na pizza sa ospital, katulad ng wala nang ibang Black Government na bumisita pa.

“Can I have a word with you?” Tinig ni Van na hindi ko matukoy kung ako o si Jin ang pinatutungkulan. I was about to say something subalit naunahan ako ni Jin.

“We don’t do words, Freniere,” seryosong sagot ni Jin na bakas ang galit sa boses.

“Not with you. With her,” seryoso ring sagot ni Van Freniere. Mas humigpit ang hawak sa akin ni Jin. I gritted my teeth.

“And get her into another trouble? Hell, no. I will never let you,” wika ni Jin na ikinagulat ko. I’ve seen him be serious and flippant but this exchange was different. There was an intensity in him that wasn’t there before. Ano’ng meron ngayon?

“I’m the one who got her out. Kaya sa ayaw at sa gusto mo, kakausapin ko ang babaeng yan,” may pagbabantang sabi ni Van at saka tumingin sa akin. He was absolutely commanding by the look in his eyes. Too bad. The more you put authority over me, the more I will resist.

“I won’t talk to you,” matatag kong sabi.

Tila umapoy ang mata ni Van sa sinabi ko. Humakbang siya palapit subalit iniharang ni Jin ang kaniyang katawan sa pagitan namin. “I saved you. Your life is mine now.” He hissed at my direction.

“I could have saved her myself if you had brought me. She’s not yours,” Jin growled.

Can smiled. “Oh, really? We’ll see,” sagot niya at saka humakbang palayo kasunod ang grupo niya. Before Makki left, I just saw him shrugged. Jin finally let me go.

“Now, I’m really worried, Summer,” seryoso niyang sabi.

“Don’t be, Jin,” sagot ko at saka dumiretso sa una kong klase.

The day passed by normally. Too calm and quiet for my taste. Mukhang nasanay na ako na hindi palaging normal ang mga nangyayari sa buong araw. After my last class, I decided to go out of the campus. I took a cab papunta sa destinasyon ko. I have to pay her a visit. Well, she’s a living evidence that I might not be hopeless and I could rescue someone. Improvement yun sa personality ko. Isa pa, I now realized how important it is to live. I got answers in that dream with Lawrence. Or hallucination. Or

maybe that was the limbo between life and death. Whatever it was, it sure helped set me free.

Mukhang ang bahaging iyon ang turning point para sa akin. On that deadly rush of time, I learned things I should have learned many years ago. I learned how to live, to let go and to see things clearly. Tama si Lawrence, there was a world different from my past with him. Kung nandito siya ngayon, magugustuhan niya rin ang mundong ito. The things I learned from him were basics. It was almost funny how I didn't see that before. I also learned how stupid I was. Naisip ko kung dapat ko bang sinabi kay Autumn yung panaginip ko. Would she want to hear about Lawrence after all this years?

Binuksan ko ang pinto ng kwartong sinabi sa akin ni Jamie nang marating ko ang ospital. There I saw Mirden, lying on the bed with machines and tubes connected to her body.

"Are you her friend?" Tanong ng isang babaeng mukhang pagod at puno ng pag-aalala.

"I'm Summer," sagot ko. She suddenly rushed to me and put me in her arms. Ilang mahigpit na yakap ba ang matatanggap ko sa loob ng isang araw?

"I've heard a lot of things about you," wika ng ginang.

"Uh, probably bad things?" Sambit ko. Pinakawalan niya ako at hinarap.

"Yes! That you're stupid, not thinking, cold and full of stunt! That what they said in your school until you came after my daughter."

"At kinumpirma ko lang ang lahat…"

"Tama. Pero nagpapasalamat ako at ginawa mo iyon. It doesn't really matter if you have a stinking delinquent personality. The important thing is, you tried to save my baby," wika niya at nakita ko ang pagtulo ng luha nang sulyapan niya ang nakaratay na si Mirden. Na-miss ko tuloy si Mama. I somehow wished they stayed longer with me.

“I didn’t actually saved Mirden, Mrs. Montgomery. Pinalala ko lang ang sitwasyon dahil pati ako naging biktima. I wasn’t thinking…” Malumanay kong sabi.

Mrs. Montgomery smiled at me. “There are things better done with the guts and not the head, Miss Summer.” I stared at her. Hindi ako makapaniwalang naririnig ko ito mula sa mommy ni Mirden. She always seem to do things based on logic and careful planning. And her wit is handy most of the time.

I returned her smile. “You’re quite right. Kung mangyayari man poi tong muli, sa tingin kop o ay uulitin ko ang ginawa ko.”

Nagtagal ako ng ilan pang minute habang nakikipag-usap kay Mrs. Montgomery. She’s a little weird like Mirden. They’re a family of geeks. I wonder kung anong personality ng Papa niya. After all the mind torture ay nagpaalam ako sa ginang. Malapit nang magdilim noon. Nang papalapit na ako sa exit ay nahagip ng mata ko ang kadarating lang na si Detective Patrick Penber. I made a U-turn at tinahak ko ang direksyon patungo sa kanya. He looked surprised to see me subalit hampas ng bag ang sinalubong ko nang ilang distansiya na lang ang pagitan namin.

“You prick! Liar! How dare you fabricate a story about me! At sa pamilya ko pa!” Hinampas ko siyang muli sa inis ko subalit naharang niya kaagad iyon ng kamay niya at kinuha ang bag ko.

“Calm down, Summer. Sumama ka sa akin,” wika niya at hinila ako papuntang exit palabas ng ospital. “Okay, ano na naman bang hindi nagpapatahimik sa kaluluwa mo? You were saved. You are alive. Can’t you just be grateful?” Halata ang pagkairita sa tinig niya. Subalit tinapatan ko lang iyon at marahas na inagaw ang aking bag.

“Yeah. Hell, yeah! I was saved. I’m alive and strong as an ogre. I’m still existing right now and could continue being a bitch to anyone I want to. But what’s with the epic good news wherein you are the legendary hero who saved the rogue Me and the innocent Her?!” Galit kong tanong. Tanggap ko naman ang role ko sa story as an unthinking bitch who wanted some attention. Pero bakit ang detective pang ito ang makikinabang sa down personality ko?

Lumingon muna sa paligid si Detective Penber bago sumagot. “Ano ang gusto mong sabihin ko? Na kumilos ako na ang tanging back-up ko lang ay isang suicidal na high school student? Na hiningi ko ang tulong ng Mafia Freniere para iligtas ka at ang kidnap victim para matakpan ang unethical move ko? God, do you even think of the consequences?” I stared at him open-mouthed.

“Hiningi mo ang tulong ng mga Freniere?” Pagkukumpirma ko sa mahinang boses. This guy who hated the Freniere like locusts at iniimbestigahan ang pamilyang iyon?

Huminga siya ng malalim bago sumagot. “I cannot risk my profession. At isa pa, noong gabing nawala ka, biglang lumitaw sa party si Giovanni Freniere. Sinasabi ko na nga ba at hindi siya ordinaryong estudyante. Hinahanap ka niya pero hindi kita makita. Nawalan din ako ng contact sa’yo. He said that he’ll get you and he meant only you. So I cooperated with him para mailigtas din si Mirden Montgomery.”

“But why would he do that?” Naguguluhan kong tanong. Van Freniere didn’t save me, it’s all clear. He just wanted to get me, like a thing of his possession.

“I have no idea, Summer. At isa pa, hindi pa natatapos sa pagliligtas sa inyo ang kaso. There’s something that we can’t leave at loose,” wika niya.

“Ano yun?” Tanong ko. I almost sacrificed my life here. I think I have the right to know such a thing.

“We have to kill this organization from its roots. Meron pang mas malaking kwento na may mas malaking tao sa likod ng mga ito,” wika niya. Hindi ko alam kung nagdidilim na ang paligid o ang impormasyong hatid niya ang nakapagpaparamdam ng lamig sa akin. Kung hindi ganoon ay hindi pa rito natatapos ang lahat? No one was really safe.

“And regarding that thing, kalian mong manatili lang sa loob ng Montello campus, which is, apparently hindi mo ginawa. Hindi ka ba sinabihan ni Giovanni Freniere tungkol doon?”

“Wala akong planong kausapin siya,” sagot ko at ibinaling sa ibang direksiyon ang aking paningin.

“Alam kong ayaw mo siyang makasama sa parehong landas. Ako rin. Pero sa tingin ko ay iyon ang matalinong gawin. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang posisyon niya sa Mafia pero mukhang hindi siya ordinaryong tauhan lang. He could be protection for you and he could also be my powerful ally to solve the case. But well, even though, I don’t really trust him.”

Gusto kong sabihin na wala rin akong tiwala kay Van Freniere. When I saw him at school for the first time after we went out of that laboratory, every core in my body asked me to run away. Only the thought of not backing down from him keep me rooted on that spot next to Jin. Sinabi ko kay Jin na huwag siyang mag-alala sa akin. But if I’ll be honest, I don’t want to have to do anything with Van or his mafia. Pero ang pinaka-nakaka-disturb na bagay na narealize ko ay ang epekto niya sa akin. I’m scared to be with him because I don’t really trust myself anymore with him.

“I got it. Just don’t act like the Messiah next time, saving the mankind. Anyway, you saved Mirden. That’s a good job,” sagot ko.

“It was necessary. And it was a good job but I didn’t save her. Malaki na ang apoy nang marating ko ang kabilang building. Masyadong mabilis kumilos ang mafia,” wika niya na ikinanuot ng noo ko. Then who saved Mirden?

“But she’s alive, she’s here,” naguguluhan kong turan.

“Someone saved her,” aniya.

“Who?” I asked impatiently.

“Tres Freniere. She was saved by Giovanni’s monster brother.” Mas lalong ikinalaglag ng panga ko ang aking narinig. Si Tres? Meron ba siyang kakayahang magligtas ng tao? I thought he’s not a maker of life, just the ender of it.

“Siguro may ginawa siyang masama kay Mirden kaya comatose pa rin siya. Dapat sana ay okay na siya ngayon but that monster-”

Detective Penber cut me off. Okay, I was judgmental towards Tres now. “She’s overdosed and over-fatigued. She also got bruises. And who knows what else that organization did to her in that laboratory.” I agreed with him. Probably, she’s in some kind of a mental trauma.

“So, ano nang lagay niya?” Biglang tanong ni Detective Penber. Mukhang si Mirden ang tinutukoy niya.

“She will be fine. She’ll make it.” It was too positive even for my personality but it’s true. I believe Mirden will fight for her life. Besides, I seriously don’t want her dead.

“I hope so. May kailangan pa kaming pag-usapan.” I stared at him with curiosity. Alam kaya niyang gusto siya ni Mirden? Mukhang iyon nga ang sitwasyon ngayon.

“Bakit hindi mo subukang kausapin ang Mom niya. You’ll probably like her.” Well, I was also serious about this suggestion. Nakikini-kinita ko na ang isang geeky conversation na wala akong lugar.

“I’ll do that pero kailangan muna kitang ihatid pabalik sa Montello campus. We’re not sure we’re clear now. We have to be careful,” wika niya. Balak kong i-turn down ang offer niya pero naisip ko ring tama siya. I started to get the feeling that I was being watched or maybe I was just paranoid.

Tahimik lang kami sa loob ng vintage Mustang ni Detective Penber hanggang sa makarating kami ng Montello Campus. Marami pang mga katanungan sa utak ko subalit hindi ako sigurado kung si Detective Penber ba ang dapat sumagot sa mga iyon. Walang imik na umibis ako ng sasakyan nang huminto ito sa tapat ng Girl’s Dormitory.

“Study ‘Saying-Thank-You-101’!” Narinig kong pahabol ng detective nang malapit na ako sa entrance ng dormitory. I didn’t respond. Kaunti lang ang mga nakatambay sa lounge ng gusali. As expected, I received weird glances again from those people.

Dumiretso ako sa second floor patungong kwarto namin. Wala si Jamie. She was probably having dinner. I could grab one but I think I'll have a shower first. I locked the door and hastily got out of my P.E. uniform and covered myself in a towel. Papasok na sana ako sa C.R. nang mapansin kong tila may nabago sa kwarto. My bedside drawer was open. Nakalabas din mula sa pagkakatago sa likod ng unan ko ang Looking For Alaska book ni John Green. Kinakabahang tumingin ako sa paligid at nakita kong nakabukas ang nag-iisang bintana sa aming kwarto. What the hell! I made my mind up at nagmamadaling pumasok sa C.R. Sa ganitong sitwasyon, kailangan kong humanap ng mapagtataguan. I locked the door at saka napabuntung hininga.

"Why are you locking us in?" Napasigaw ako nang may magsalita mula sa aking likuran. Nagmamadali kong binuksan ang warm light sa C.R. only to turn it off again ng makita ko kung sino ang kasama ko sa loob.

"I'm not locking myself in! I'm hiding!" Nanginginig ang tinig kong sagot habang binubuksan ang pinto. I can't open it. That someone was keeping it closed by force.

"From whom?" Tanong niya.

"From you," sagot ko na ikinatawa niya. And this isn't looking good for me because I was locked with lights off and the person I'm hiding from is my companion. Wow. That was just… frustrating.

"And why were you hiding from me?" Tanong niya.

"Sebastian, can't you just leave me alone? Why are you here, anyway?" I know I have to be careful dahil delikadong tao ang nasa harap ko ngayon. And also here's this fatal thought na wala akong idea sa kaya niyang gawin. He told me that he will kill me the next time I see him. I could turn the light on but then his pervert mind might do something else.

"Dahil gusto kong alamin kung nagtagumpay ba ang mahal kong kapatid sa pagliligtas sa'yo. And it seems like he did." I can feel him smirking at his words. Ano to? Nasa kamustahan stage na ba kami?

"Well, he did. You got your answer. Can't you just go?" Tanong ko.

“You locked the door,” seryoso niyang wika.

“I opened it already pero pinipigilan mo yung pinto na bumukas!”

“Then it only means I’m not yet done with you,” sagot niya. Naramdaman ko ang kamay niya sa akin leeg.

“Don’t touch me,” mas lalong lumakas ang kaba sa dibdib ko.

“And why shouldn’t I? You’re tempting.” His voice was ice cold, freezing my bravery.

“I… I… You saved Mirden. Why did you do that?” I was hoping that if I could make a conversation, I could find a way to-

“I didn’t save her. That would be just an easy death. I thought she would die longer. Don’t tell me, she’s still alive?” Turan niya. I can’t believe him!

“She is. And, thank you.” Thank you? Lame! Pero kailangan ko pa siyang i-engage.

“Oh, really? I think I just made history by breaking my own rules. It’s frustrating.” Ugh! May sira talaga sa sistema ni Tres!

“And you made it, so that’s a good thing?” Wika ko. I meant it a little, though. Our fates didn’t end tragically even though it was still bloody.

“Of course, I will make it out alive. Iniisip mo bang matatapos ako nang ganun-ganun na lang? I’m not just a guest antagonist. Ako na yata ang pinaka nakakafrustrate na kontrabida sa buhay mo,” he answered in a playful tone. Well, kung isa siyang kontrabidang hindi mamatay-matay, eh talagang nakaka-frustrate nga siya. But hell, kontrabida sa buhay ng isang kontrabida? It doesn’t sound good.

“And now, I’m so frustrated,” komento ko.

“You are?” Narinig kong tanong niya. Ang hirap makipag-usap sa taong hindi mo masyadong maaninag at ang tanging ideya mo lang sa ginagawa niya ay ang kamay niya sa leeg mo.

“I am. Ano bang kailangan mo sa akin, Tres? If you want to kill me, can you just postpone it? Give me a break. Kaka-survive ko lang!” Nawala ang takot ko kanina at napalitan na ng impatience. Nagugutom na rin ako at gusto ko nang matapos ang usapang ito. O kumustahan.

“I told you, I just want to check if you’re still alive. Gusto ko ring bisitahin sina Giovanni at Tyler,” wika niya. Mukhang ang pakahulugan niya sa visitation ay trespassing. But wait, Tyler?

“You’re going to visit, Tyler, too? I didn’t think you particularly cared for him.” Pati ba naman bata ay hindi niya palulusutin.

I heard him chuckle. “Why not? I have all the privilege.” Mukhang nagmamalaki pang sagot niya.

“What privilege? Privilege of the bad guy?” Nang-iinsulto kong tanong.

“That’s partly true. Parang ikaw, you can screw everybody and be rude to them. That’s the privilege of being a bitch,” sagot niya. I gave him my most menacing stare kahit hindi niya iyon nakikita.

“How about screwing all the women? Is that the privilege of being a jerk?” Ganti ko.

“That? That would be the privilege of being a gorgeous, hot bastard,” sagot niya at saka binuksan ang ilaw. Mas hinigpitan ko ang pagkakakapit sa tuwalya. He’s so close so I stepped back.

“I came here to warn that idiot little kid,” wika niya at nakita kong muli ang seryosong side ni Tres. Was he talking about Tyler?

“Hey! Leave him alone! He’s just a little boy!” May mali pa akong nagawa kay Tyler last time. Maybe I could at least save him from Tres’s clutches.

“Innocent, little boy? That’s funny. I have to go,” nakatawa niyang sagot at hinawakan ang door knob. Pinigilan ko siya sa braso.

“Leave him alone.”

“Why the hell should I leave my brother alone?” Ganting tanong niya na ikinatameme ko. Tyler Del Valle? He is Tres’s little brother? And Van’s as well? Kaya ba siya kilala ni Algernon Freniere? At iyon ba ang dahilan kung bakit overprotective sa kaniya si Van?

“He’s your brother?” Tanong ko na parang hindi pa maliwanag ang narinig.

“Yes. And he is everything but an innocent, little kid,” he impatiently answered.

“Do you mean-is he like you or Van?” Is he a monster, too? But I didn’t bother asking that dahil hindi pa rin ako makapaniwala.

“Oh, stop being stupid. He is the Mafia Reaper. Oh, come on. Why do I have to do all the explaining. I’m not a f cking professor!” Sagot niya at saka tuluyang binuksan ang pinto. Lumabas siya at agad din akong sumunod, my mind still reeling from the information he gave me. Aware ba siya na sensitibong mga impormasyon ang sinabi niya? I wanted to ask more about Tyler. Pero natigilan ako nang makita ang dalawang pares ng mga mata na nakatutok sa amin. Casual lang na ngumiti si Tres. Hinigpitan ko ang tuwalya.

“I was… I was just about to invite you for dinner, Summer,” wika ni Jamie na agad nakabawi. “And someone wants to talk to you.” She gestured to the person with her.

“We. Need. To. Talk,” wika ni Van sa seryoso at may pagbabantang tinig. Every particle of my body was screaming at me to run as far as I can but the intensity from his eyes kept me rooted on the spot. It looked like he could slit my throat if I ever dare say no.

Oh, please! Can I have a break?!

[26] Chapter 26: The Mafia Reaper

Chapter 26: The Mafia Reaper

“And why should I talk to you?” Tanong ko nang humupa ang pagkabigla naming lahat sa hostility sa boses ni Van. Tres seemed to be expecting his brother’s reaction. And hell, why were there boys in our room? Oh, right! That’s because they’re not ordinary boys— they’re deadly, twisted and evil descendants of Adam.

“Dahil sinabi ko. Now, Jamie and… you,” turo ni Van kay Tres, “Please excuse us. We want some privacy,” seryosong wika ni Van na agad namang sinunod ni Jamie. She was about to turn towards the door but I stopped her.

“No, Jamie. This is our room and we want some privacy. Now, you devils, please, get lost,” sarkastiko kong wika. I don’t really like Van commanding everybody.

“I was actually intending to drag you out of this room so that we can talk outside pero mukhang galing ka sa isang pribadong okasyon at iniisip ko kung nanaisin mo bang makita ka ng lahat na ganyan ang hitsura. But it seems as if you wouldn’t mind if we talk outside so…” Mabilis na nakalapit sa akin si Van upang kunin ang braso ko at saka kinaladkad ako patungong pintuan. I panicked. Mukhang wala na akong pagpipilian.

“Oh, crap! Stop! Jamie, Sebastian! Get out! Now!” Sigaw ko. I thought I saw a smirk on Van’s serious and furious face bago siya tumigil sa pagkaladkad sa akin. Pinanood ko lang habang awkward na lumabas si Jamie ng pintuan. I frowned when Tres turned towards the window. What he was about to do looked familiar.

“Excuse me?” Wika ko kay Tres. Lumingon siya at saka ngumiti.

“Shortcut,” aniya at saka nawala na siya sa bintana. If he flew or jumped, that was what I wasn’t sure about.

“I think you have the same brain waves,” narinig kong wika ni Van. Tinapunan ko siya ng masamang tingin at saka ako lumapit sa aking kama upang isuot muli ang aking P.E. shorts. He just watched me. It was definitely uncomfortable and awkward pero ayokong ipakita sa kaniya na kaya niya akong gawing uncomfortable. Dang it, where did I throw my shirt?!

“Spill it out, Freniere,” isinatinig ko.

“Una, what were you doing with Tres in the bathroom?” Tanong niya.

Sinalubong ko ang tingin niya. “What do you think?” Balik-tanong ko sa kaniya.

“Do you have any idea who you are dealing with?” Tanong niyang muli. I rolled my eyes at him. That was an overused question.

“I have all the ideas. But there are those occassions wherein I really have no idea. Just like the fact that Tyler del Valle is actually a member of the Freniere family.” Nakita ko ang pagkagulat ni Van sa sinabi ko. What’s with the big secret?

“Sinabi ito sa’yo ni Tres?” Tanong niya.

“And he’s a Mafia reaper? What was that supposed to mean?” Tanong ko.

“Don’t ever mention it again,” sabi niya sa pagtatangkang balewalain ang aking mga tanong. Pero malaking balita iyon para sa akin. Bakit niya iniiwasang sagutin ang tanong ko?

“Pero bakit del Valle ang apelyido niya at hindi Freniere?” Tanong kong muli. Pinili kong huwag pansinin ang mga sinasabi niya.

“Bakit ka lumabas ng campus?” Mukhang ganun din ang ginagawa ni Van sa mga tanong ko. But I was a hard-headed, thick-skulled human. So I still pursued my case.

“Is that the reason why you are so overprotective of him?”

“Next time, don’t leave Montello High. We’re still not sure if it’s safe now,” sagot niya.

Mukhang isa na naman ito sa hopeless at walang patutunguhan naming pag-uusap. Parallel lines never meet just like our parallel thoughts. “Ano ang Mafia reaper?” Kulit kong muli.

“Damn it, Summer! Can’t you just stay out of it?!” Tumaas ang galit niyang boses. I should be shaken by it but I don’t know. Mukhang mas pinatapang na ako ng mga nakaraan kong karanasan.

“Well, I can’t! I hopelessly can’t! Dahil iisipin ko iyon at hindi ako makakatulog sa gabi!” Pagtataas ko rin ng boses. Wala sa amin ang nagtangkang magsalita muli. I just stared at him with brave eyes.

Huminga siya ng malalim at saka muling nagsalita. “Kung sino si Tyler sa paningin mo at sa pagkakakilala mo, ganun pa rin siya,” seryoso niyang sabi. It was like a closing answer kung kaya’t hindi ko na nagawang magtanong muli. Tumango na lang ako. But hell, I won’t give it a rest.

“Yung nangyari nitong mga nakaraang araw…” I was thinking of Detective Penber’s Thank-You-101. Pero nagbago ang ekspresyon ni Van at bumangis ang gwapo niyang mukha.

“DON’T DO IT AGAIN!” Galit niyang sabi.

“What?” Inis kong tanong. Kakasimula ko pa lang magsalita, a!

“Your stunt! Your stupid, suicidal escapade! Alam mo bang muntik ka nang matuluyan doon?! I should have killed that damn detective, too!” Sagot niya.

“Then why do you care? Why did you save me?!” Inis kong ganti.

“Because you’re my prey! I won’t let anyone else have the pleasure of killing you. I’m going to be the only reason of your last, dying breath.” I rolled my eyes at him. So he saved me para siya ang pumatay sa akin, how classic! But if there was one thing I could be grateful for was at least he wasn’t going to kill me now.

“Why are you keeping me alive then?” Pagsasatinig ko ng nasa utak ko.

Hindi siya sumagot. Humakbang lang siya malapit sa headboard ng kama ko at may kinuha sa may parteng sulok. Nagulat ako nang ihagis niya sa

akin ang bagay na pinulot niya. Agad ko iyong sinambot, thanks to my good reflexes. He just threw my P.E. shirt at me.

“Wear it. Don’t be too comfortable with me,” sabi niya habang isinusuot ko ang P.E. shirt.

“I’m not. Wala lang akong choice,” inis kong sagot. Hindi ko sinasadyang humarap sa bisita na ganito ang suot at hitsura lalo pa’t wala naman akong inaasahang panauhin. Higit sa lahat, hindi ko inaasahan na magiging panauhin ko ang magkapatid na Freniere. It was like having twin Deaths knocking on your door.

“Do you mean you were not hooking up with my brother?” Tanong niya na muntik ko nang ikahalakhak. Me? And Tres? Not gonna happen.

“Ha-ha. Will it be okay if I include him in my long harem of boys?” I sarcastically asked. Seriously, ni hindi ko nga ma-imagine.

“No. But I think it will just work the other way around. You’ll be a part of his harem of girls,” sagot niya.

“Yeah. And certainly, I won’t even consider it. Kaya huwag kang mag-alala, sayo’ng sayo na ang pinakamamahal mong kuya,” wika ko na ikinagusot ng mukha niya. What? Did I just say something horrible and gross?

“It was a good thing that Detective Penber brought you back here,” pag-iiba niya sa paksa. Ilang ulit ba naming pagtatangkaang baguhin ang usapan?

“Yeah, praise the savior,” sarkastiko kong sinabi. Sorry, I can’t help but be sarcastic towards him.

“Let it be the story,” pinal niyang sabi. It gave me this thought na tanggap niya ang ganung istorya— without him hogging the glory that should be his.

“Parte ba ‘to ng plano mo?” Tanong ko kahit na wala naman akong ideya sa pina-plano niya.

“Wala akong pina-plano. I just thought that story would be the best scenario. You’ve always been the reckless, impulsive girl who likes getting into trouble kaya hindi out-of-character sa’yo ang role mo. And someone has to be the savior. Mas madaling explanatory scenario sa kapalpakan niyo.” Hindi ko talaga gustong ipinamumukha sa akin ang kapalpakan ko. Besides, should it really be called a failure? I sacrificed a lot while I was there.

“Mirden is alive. I saved her,” matigas kong sabi. Umupo siya sa kama ko na tila nakakapagod ang kausapin ako.

“She wouldn’t be alive kung hindi kami dumating. And of course, you wouldn’t be alive, too.”

I frowned at him. Bakit ba ang daming lumalabas na superhero sa nangyari? Hindi ba dapat may pumuri naman kahit papaano sa efforts ko? I also suffered a lot as I was there and I was the one who pulled out the deadly stunt to get things going. I nearly died. I did my best pero all the failure still goes to my credit.

“So, tell me. Are these parts of the contingency plan?” Tanong kong muli. Hindi ako naniniwalang wala siyang pina-plano. Knowing he is Giovanni Freniere, having the main thought that he is a member of the Freniere family. A family who runs a ruthless, borderless mafia. Also the fact that Giovanni Freniere is a control freak. He likes controlling things.

“Kung mayroon man akong plano, the last thing I’d do is reveal it to you. That story, let them eat it up. Naisip kong pabor ito sa’yo, sa detective at sa mafia. It’s like no one touched on anything. There wasn’t any connection on this case to our group. Therefore, no unnecessary questions had to be thrown.”

Nanatili akong tahimik nang ilang sandali. Nakikita ko ang point niya. Ang sabi ni Detective Penber, hindi pa tapos ang kaso. There was a bigger story behind what we’ve gotten ourselves into. And bigger stories demand bigger characters. Mas magiging madali ang pag-iimbestiga kung hindi ka magpi-pre-empt ng detalye. Who knows what level of sensationalism those details would get into.

This fabricated story would also be in favor of Detective Penber. And it would also be good for the mafia. They could maintain secrecy and protect the untouchable record of the Freniere Mafia dahil wala namang koneksyon ang istorya sa kanila. And then, for me? Hell! What good would it do to me? Sa kahit ano'ng direksyon kong tingnan, ako ang lumalabas na argabyado at walang utak sa istoryang ginawa nila. My own father even thought of exiling me again!

Masamang tingin ang agad kong ibinato kay Van nang marealize ko ang senaryo. "Hindi mo ba naisip na meron din akong pangalan at personalidad na dapat ingatan?" Nagngangalit ang bagang na tanong ko sa kaniya.

Nagkibit lang siya ng balikat. "I know. Not a good name and reputation, though," sagot niya na mas ikina-init ng ulo ko.

Ikinuyom ko ang kamao ko sa inis. "So, tell me! Tau-tauhan lang ako sa plano niyo? Dahil definitely, ayokong maging bahagi ng kahit na ano'ng may kinalaman sa inyo!" Galit kong sabi.

Mukhang hindi siya naapektuhan. He just gave me his devilish smirk. Imagine my temper boiling up to the highest degree and the only thing he's gonna do is smirk at me? How frustrating! I'm on a killing spree mode!

"Listen to this, Leondale. This game is not for you to play. Stay out of it. The real picture here is that there's an arena and the players are all deadly, rogue predators. And then suddenly, a stupid, weak, little girl jumped in. Wala naman talaga akong paki-alam sa mga iyon, eh. But you dragged me into this. If you only knew how to listen then we would never have been in this situation," wika niya at saka tumayo.

This got me up. I grabbed his arm as he turned towards the door pero kabaligtaran ang kinalabasan. Now, he was the one grabbing me and he pushed me down on my bed with him leaning over me.

"I— I didn't drag you into this," nauutal kong sabi. Masyado siyang malapit.

“Wrong answer. You already did. Now if I have any plans, that would be nothing but wholesome, good and nationalistic,” wika niya.

“Deadly. Diabolical. And unlawful,” sagot ko.

He smirked again. Smirking devil! “And that would be a plan that you don’t want to know,” wika niya at saka ako iniwang nakatulala sa kisame.

“Just stay out of it. I’ll play the game for you,” narinig kong sabi niya bago ang pagsara ng pinto. What did he just say? I dragged him into this?! Wasn’t it the other way around? I was dragged into this mess because of getting involved with them! And ever since, wala akong matandaang pagkakataon na idinamay ko siya rito. Maaaring inilagay ko nga ang sarili ko sa isang delikadong sitwasyon pero pinipilit kong walang ibang madamay…

After everything that happened, parang nawala na ang urges kong manakit ng inosenteng tao katulad ng ginawa ko sa ibang schools na napasukan ko. Unless, it’s for self-defense. And with the path that I’m taking in right now, how can I defend myself? Ang mga kalaban ay walang takot kumitil ng buhay. How was it possible that I’m still alive? Someone is protecting me. Of course! Paano ako mananataling buhay pa ngayon kung walang nagpoprotekta sa akin? Van Freniere… Due to his obsession on taking away my life, he became selfish and wanted my blood for himself. And it turned out quite the other way around, he was protecting my life. Kahit ano pa ang dahilan niya, lumalabas na pinoprotektahan niya ako. At kung tama ang naaalala ko, hindi lang siya… There was still this other person…

Napabalikwas ako sa pagkakahiga at nagtungo sa banyo upang maglinis ng katawan. Now, I realized na hindi mo kailangang maging matalino para mag-isip. I was seeing things now, even though they were vague.

I was on a rush. Nagmamadali akong lumabas ng dorm at nagtungo sa cafeteria. Hindi para kumain kundi para hanapin ang isang tao. Halos lahat ng mesa sa cafeteria ay okupado. Nakita ko si Jin kasama si Zach at ang iba pang miyembro ng Dark Monarch na inookupa ang ilang magkakatabing mesa. No signs of Black Government. That was an unspoken territory rule. Inilibot ko ang aking paningin sa paligid. Nagulat ako nang may humawak

sa aking braso at hinila ako. The quick Jin Cast was grabbing me towards the Dark Monarch tables.

“Jin, wala akong panahong makipag-bonding sa mga kasama mo,” naiinis kong sabi subalit hindi siya tumigil.

“You’re not my girlfriend if you don’t know my friends. Kaya ipakikilala kita sa kanila,” nakangiti niyang sabi. I rolled my eyes at him. Talaga bang pinangatawanan niya ang non-existent na relationship namin? Nahagip ng mata ko ang pagpasok ni Tyler.

“Hey, boys! This is—” Panimula ni Jin na pinutol ko.

“Pleasures! Bye!” Mabilis kong sabi at saka nagmamadaling lumayo patungo kay Tyler. Narinig ko pa ang inabot na pangangantiyaw ni Jin at ang disgusto ni Zach sa ginawa ko. Nagulat si Tyler nang makita niyang palapit ako sa kaniya at mas lalo siyang hindi nakahuma nang hilahin ko siya sa braso palabas ng cafeteria. Dire-diretso kaming naglakad hanggang sa kaunti na lang ang tao sa paligid.

“S-summer, saan tayo pupunta?” Puno ng kainosentehan niyang tanong. Hindi ako sumagot. Hindi ako makapaniwalang ang batang ito ay isang Mafia reaper.

Bigla siyang tumigil sa paghakbang nang mapansin niyang papasok na kami sa Nightwoods. It could be the most private, though dangerous, part of Montello High. Hinila ko siya ng ubod-lakas subalit hindi ko siya matinag sa kaniyang kinatatayuan. Nagulat ako nang buong higpit niyang hawakan ang braso ko.

“Hindi tayo pwedeng pumasok sa Nightwoods,” wika niya. Lumingon ako sa kaniya at nakita kong tila nagbago ang kaniyang ekspresyon. Nawala na ang inosenteng Tyler. He looked cold and devilish… This look I only ever saw on two other people. Deadly, like a… He’s like a Freniere.

“So, nakababatang kapatid ka nga nina Giovanni at Sebastian Freniere,” seryoso kong sabi. Biglang bumalik ang kainosentehan sa mukha niya. He seemed surprised that I knew this thing about him.

“Ang tanging nakakaalam lang ng bagay na yan maliban sa mga Freniere ay si Kuya Makki at Kuya Ethan,” tahimik niyang sabi. He even talks like a kid!

“Nagkaroon ka ng kapatid na may matabil na dila sa katauhan ni Sebastian Freniere,” sagot ko.

Tumungo siya at saka malungkot na sumagot. “He doesn’t really like me.”

What was new? Tres never seemed to like anyone pero nakaramdam ako ng simpatya kay Tyler. It was like I was seeing Autumn in him. Uh, wait, bakit naman sarili ko ang nakikita kong ikumpara kay Tres? “Hindi mo naman kailangang magustuhan ka ni Sebastian,” wika ko.

“He hates me. Naiintindihan ko naman iyon.” Pinagmasdan ko siya. Hindi ko nakikita ang isang reaper— o assassin, kung tama ang hinala ko— sa katauhan niya. To me, he was just a fragile kid with inferiority complex.

“Isa ka ba talagang mafia reaper?” Tanong ko. Hindi siya sumagot agad. I was wondering if he was going to admit it or not. But I could see the guilty look on his face. That’s enough confirmation. I could also tell that he really did not want me finding out about this.

“Yes, I am the Mafia reaper. One of the Freniere family’s deadliest assasins. I’m also the one who reaped the dark souls of those assasins sent to kill you. I make their deaths,” pag-amin niya na ikinagulat ko. Even though I knew that he was the reaper, nagulat pa rin ako na siya ang tumatapos ng mga assasins na ipinadala ng organisasyon para tapusin ako, na siya pala ang tinutukoy ng lider ng grupong kumuha sa amin sa masquerade ball.

“B-but I thought that was Van,” wika ko.

“Kuya Van would never be useful. He’s scary when he punishes the sinners. We need to kill assasins in the fastest and quickest way possible. But Kuya Van would never do that. He prefers to kill his prey in slow, painful, miserable death. He will let them live, only to make them miserable and want to beg for death instead. Mas gusto ni Kuya Van na nagpapakamatay na lang dahil sa paghihirap ang mga pinaparusahan niya.”

I was shocked. Subalit naalala ko nang halos madurog ang braso ng naka-maskarang tao sa laboratory nang pagbabarilin ito ni Van ng dalang shotgun. Pero hindi niya iyon pinatay and even at the last moment, hinayaan niyang maghingalo ang taong iyon. Slow and painful death, that is so Van Freniere's style…

"Pero… isa ka lang bata," wika kong muli. Kung ano si Tyler sa paningin mo, ganun pa rin siya. He was still the innocent freshmen to me but is he what I believe him to be?

"I first killed someone when I was ten…" Tahimik niyang sabi. This got me really off-guard. When I was ten, I was afraid of blood. "Pinasukan kami sa bahay namin at pinatay ang nanay ko," pagpapatuloy niya.

"That is horrible. To witness something like that…" Hindi ko alam kung paano ko papawiin ang lungkot sa mukha niya.

"Kami lang ng nanay ko noon dahil isa lang siyang assasin ni Sir Algernon. Nagkaroon sila ng maiksing affair na ako ang naging bunga. At tapos, kinuha sa akin ang nanay ko ng ganun na lang. Alam ko kung saan nakalagay ang baril niya kaya kinuha ko yun at itinutok sa likod ng taong pumatay sa kaniya. I shot his head… And then Sir Algernon came and saved me from being alone."

I didn't know what to say or how to respond. Gusto kong umiyak. Naiiyak ako dahil hindi siya umiiyak. Tila gustong kumawala ng luha niya pero mas matibay si Tyler sa emosyon niya. Pinagbabawalan niya ang sarili niya.

"Alam mo bang hindi ko ipagkakalat kung iiyak ka?" Wika ko. He looked at me. Matagal at walang salita. Hanggang sa nakita ko ang pangingislap ng mata niya at tuluyang pamamasa ng kaniyang pisngi. Agad akong lumapit sa kaniya at niyakap siya. He was really just a kid who is to be protected. Maybe not from the assasins he was so used to facing but from loneliness.

"I'm not innocent… I'm not innocent…" Sabi niya sa pagitan ng mga hikbi.

"Sshh… Tyler, you are innocent. What happened then was a cruel twist of fate. You had no other choice. Innocence is not just about what you do but

also with how you think. And what you are to the people around you. Its measure is why some people choose to protect you.” Kung ano man ang ginawa ni Tyler, ganun pa rin siya sa paningin ko. He’s still that kid who’s actually very innocent. A freshman who’s got a crush on me. A boy whose first dance I just ruined.

“Summer, do you like Kuya Van?” Tanong niya. Kumalas ako sa pagkakayakap sa kaniya at gusot ang mukha ko siyang tinitigan. Innocent… and stupid.

“No,” tipid kong sagot.

“It’s okay if you like him. I will protect you. I always will,” wika niya na ikina-noot ng noo ko.

“I can protect myself from him,” sagot ko.

Umiling siya. “Not from him. Even if you became important for Kuya Van, I will protect you from others.”

Hindi ko siya nasundan doon. “Huh?” Tanong ko.

“I think you have to know. The Novous and the organization are moving. They are back,” sabi niya na tila nagdala sa utak ko sa isang puzzle.

“Hindi kita naiintindihan. Ano’ng tinutukoy mo?” Tanong ko.

“Ang mga Novou, sila ay pamilya ng mga assasins. They were hired by this organization to wipe out the line of the Frenieres. But the Frenieres are invincible. The Novous couldn’t touch them. They couldn’t even lay their hands on them. Kaya tinatarget nila ang mga iniisip nilang weakest points ng Freniere. They start with people important to us. Pinatay nila ang nanay ko. Pinatay din nila si Alexandria Freniere, ang ina nila Kuya Van at Kuya Tres. Ang akala namin ay si Andrew Novou na lang ang natitirang assasin. But they killed him. At ang ibig sabihin noon, may nakalinya pa silang ibang assasins.”

Kung ganoon, yun pala ang istorya ng mga Novou. They were bound to kill the Frenieres. But because the real Frenieres were untouchable, they attacked something else. Something that will hurt much more. Cowards! Kaya ba nakipagkalas si Van kay Trinity? Kaya ba walang siniseryoso si Tres? Ito rin ba ang dahilan kung bakit sa kabila ng nakakatakot niyang aura ay tila malungkot si Mr. Algernon Freniere? At si Tyler, mag-isa na lang siya…

“Don’t worry about me, Tyler. Van and I hate each other with a passion. Siguro naman merong common sense ang mga assasin na yan para hindi ako puntiryahin.” Ngumiti sa akin si Tyler.

“Ang mga assasins na tulad ko ay mayroong mas higit pa sa common sense. Minsan, mas nakikita namin ang hindi nakikita ng iba.” Sumeryoso siya. “I will protect you, Summer.” Seriously, this was getting weird. What’s with these assasins? They were making my life harder.

Nakarinig ako ng kaluskos mula sa Nightwoods. Hinawakan ni Tyler ang braso ko at hinila ako pabalik sa Montello High.

“Talaga bang bukod sa warning ay kailangan niya pang mag-eavesdrop sa amin? Bakit kaya hindi pa siya bumalik sa mansiyon? He must really hate me,” narinig kong bulong ni Tyler.

“Huh?” Tanong ko sa kaniya.

“Wala. Sabay tayong mag-dinner,” nakingiti na niyang sabi.

Sumunod ako, relieved. Well, Tyler was still Tyler. Maybe not all assasins have cold hearts. Maybe some of them just got no choice. Tyler is a warm-hearted boy who wanted his older brother to like him, a young assasin with a tragic background. And after everything he told me, aaminin ko maging mahirap man that Van was right. Kung ano si Tyler sa paningin naming lahat ay ganun pa rin siya. Or else, I wouldn’t have dinner with an assasin right now.

[27] Chapter 27: Insurgency

Author’s Note:

Who voted for my girl friend, Mayu? Yay! Fierce flying kisses to those who clicked the link and voted. The voting is up until January 26 and we are aiming to get her to top 20 so please, if you haven’t yet, do it! Here is the link:

http://toptabapp.com/e/tl7.

But whether she makes it or not, the best thing is I did my part as her awesome friend. Normally kasi, I don’t demand for any requests but since she’s my real friend (and some gothic lolita dresses), I think I just put my name on a shameful line of requesting. Haha. But that’s just me, haha!

Anyway, I’m so lost with the Dedication pleads so I really don’t know. I’m leaving that matter to editor MUB. :)

It’s “Conspiracy” by Paramore for this chapter. Listen and maybe you’ll know why. :)

Blood and Love,

Siel Alstreim :)

Chapter 27: Insurgency

Montello High School. Maaaring para sa iba ay isa lang itong ordinaryong paaralan. May maganda at Victorian style na gusali, dormitoryong para sa Babae at Lalaki, at mga tipikal na uri ng mga estudyante. Subalit para sa akin, malayo sa salitang normal ang Montello High. Ni hindi ko nga namamalayan na ilang buwan na pala akong nananatili rito. Ilang buwan na pala akong nakikipaglaban para sa buhay ko. I met some friends, at least, that’s what they call it. I met lots of enemies. I met a few bitches, nerds and rich, spoiled kids. I met gangsters, mafia, assasins and oh, a detective. Walang-wala sa expectations ko na makakaharap ko ang ganitong mga uri ng tao.

I also experienced lots of activities. Well, school activities are a given but some are not really so-studious. P.E., table tennis, basketball, trespassed into the boy's dorm, kidnapped by some rogue organization and a boring stay in the hospital. And maybe, I actually learned a few lessons: from solving algebra to world literature, from protecting someone to surviving for yourself, from listening to thinking and from remembering to letting go.

The good thing was, I saw Lawrence again. Hindi man literal, naniniwala ako na nakita at nakausap ko talaga siya. Kahit wala na siya, nagawa pa rin niya akong tulungan. Because if he didn't help me to let go of him, I would still be holding on to the idea of "us" even in death. Hindi ako lalaban para sa sarili ko. Hindi rin ako magkakaroon ng takot na mamatay. That might be the beauty of letting go, you'll know how to live. It was like breathing with new eyes. It was like starting all over again. Kahit na hindi maganda ang magiging simula ko, it would still be a starting point.

And as a starting point, I was cutting out some paper stars for the design to be used for our school festival. I couldn't even remember why I was tricked into doing this. But it was Mirden's fault. Yeah, she was back. And she was currently giving directions to all people inside the room like a goddess. Mukhang tine-take advantage niya na naggaling siya sa isang traumatic na insidente at hindi pwedeng bigyan ng dagdag na sama ng loob. And now, she was commanding everyone on the Book Reader's Club to participate and give some efforts for the upcoming school festival. And she got me into doing this kahit hindi naman ako member ng club. But hell, galing din naman ko sa isang traumatic experience, ah! Tsk. Ang tanging sagot niya lang sa akin when I reasoned it out ay mas malakas daw ako kaysa sa kaniya. Oh, crap. So was that some perks of being stronger than the others? But then, since I was stronger, I might as well do it. Anyway, it sucks being a weakling.

"Are you okay, Summer? It looks like you want to bury that scissor into someone," tanong ni Jamie na katulad ko ay gumugupit din ng stars. Tumigil ako sandali at saka siya nilingon. Muli kong ipinagpatuloy ang paggupit sa marahang paraan.

"She's so damn bossy," wika ko na ikinatawa ni Jamie.

“Yeah. No one expected her to be,” sagot niya. Lahat ng club sa school ay required na magkaroon ng booth. And the Book Reader’s Club members decided to have a freaking coffee shop that serves not only coffee but also books. I think I will love it— I will definitely love it if I’m not here helping and I’ll just visit their shop during the school festival.

Binato ko ng masamang tingin si Mirden habang inaayos niya ang arrangements ng mga tables and chairs. Lumingon siya sa direksyon ko at sinuklian ako ng ngiti. I rolled my eyes as I saw her coming our way.

“Halatang hindi mo gusto ang ginagawa mo,” wika niya nang makalapit sa amin.

“To make it more obvious, sasabihin ko na sayo’ng hindi ko gusto ang ginagawa ko. Why do I have to grow some kindness in my heart if it really irritates me?” Sagot ko.

“Pero sa tingin ko, this is a better activity compared to other deadly stuff,” wika ni Mirden.

She got a point there so I continued cutting out stars in a solemn way. Umupo na rin si Mirden sa tabi ko at nagsimulang gumupit ng mga stars. I never thought Mirden was the Book Reader’s Club’s president. I should have known. It was pretty obvious.

“I missed this,” biglang wika ni Jamie na ikinalingon namin. “W-well, yeah. I really missed you, guys. Noong pareho kayong nawala, naging mag-isa na lang ako rito. I was a total loner and bitches were buzzing around me. Iniisip ko kung bakit hindi niyo ako kasama that time. Am I so weak? Naive? Vulnerable? They told me to come after you but I was so scared and…” Kasabay ng pagtigil ni Jamie ay ang pagpatak ng kanyang luha. Mirden got up immediately and came to her side.

“Shh.. Jamie. It’s okay. We’re here,” pagcomfort ni Mirden. But I don’t think it will sooth Jamie’s emotions. It was quite hard having such feelings of loneliness.

“Do you know that crap about being left out? Yung wala kang ideya sa mga nangyayari sa mga kaibigan mo? Tinatanong ko ang sarili ko kung maswerte ba ko dahil hindi niyo ako kasama. Dahil wala ako sa sitwasyon niyo. And I might be correct. But still, I got this horrible feeling of being left out, of not belonging. That I should be with you—” I decided to cut her immediately.

“Stop it, Jamie,” walang emosyon kong wika.

She gave me a weak look. So did Mirden. Heto na naman ako sa sintunadong pagsabay ko sa isang dramatic na sitwasyon. Pero ayoko na talagang marinig ang mga susunod pa.

“I’m sorry. Mukhang masyado akong naging emosyonal,” paumanhin ni Jamie at saka ipinagpatuloy ang paggupit ng stars. Saglit na katahimikan muna ang aking pinalipas bago ako muling nagsalita.

“Hindi ko gustong mangyari rin sa’yo ang mga nangyari sa amin. I don’t really want to see you in a hospital bed. Hindi ko sinusukat ang kakayahan mo sa delikadong sitwasyon pero mas pipiliin kong hindi ka namin kasama noon. Kung uulitin ko ang nangyari, ikukulong ko lang kayong dalawa ni Mirden sa dormitory room and then I will handle everything,” diresto kong sabi. I didn’t know what their initial reaction was. Naramdaman ko na lang ang pagyakap nila sa akin. The hell! What’s wrong with this crazy people!

“Hey! Lumayo kayo!” Tulak ko sa kanila.

“You’re so sweet! I know you care for us!” Wika ni Jamie.

“You’re not a cold-hearted person after all,” dagdag ni Mirden.

Inipon ko ang buo kong lakas upang itulak silang dalawa. “Jeez! Ano’ng parte ng sinabi ko ang sweet?” Iritable kong tanong.

“Maybe they were referring to the thought behind those words,” sabat ng isang pamilyar na tinig. I rolled my eyes when Mirden and Jamie let go of me.

“Sorry for attacking your girlfriend, Jin,” nagbibirong wika ni Jamie.

“No worries. I can always rescue her from the two of you,” nakangiting wika ni Jin at umupo sa harap ko. Binigyan ko siya ng masamang tingin. Paano nila napapaniwalaan ang mga sinasabi ng isang ito? Hindi ba nila nare-realize kung gaano ka-ridiculous na maging girlfriend niya ako?

“Ano’ng kailangan mo?” Nakasimangot kong tanong.

“Do you have a band-aid?” Tanong niya. Seriously, can’t he just lick his wounds? I gave him a blank stare. “I just scraped my knees falling for you,” wika niyang muli.

“Good. Feel the agony and pain,” walang emosyon kong sagot na ikinatawa nina Mirden at Jamie. Jin scratched his head.

“It worked on the other girls,” wika niya.

“Unfortunately, she’s not one of those other girls,” komento ng nakangiting si Mirden.

“Yeah, right. I’ve always known that,” sagot ni Jin at saka kumuha ng mga cut-out na stars. Isang napakasamang tingin ang muli kong ipinukol sa kaniya.

“Subukan mong sirain ang mga iyan sa kahit na pinakamaliit na paraan at wawakasan ko ang buhay mo,” wika ko. Agad niya iyong binitawan at saka ako hinila sa braso.

“What the—” angal ko nang mapatayo niya ako.

“What are you doing?” Tanong ni Jamie.

“I’m kidnapping my girlfriend for lunch,” sagot ni Jin na ikinatanga ko. Kinikilig na mga ngiti ang pinakawalan ng dalawa habang hinihila ako ni Jin sa braso.

“Hindi mo ba nakitang busy kami? Nagpi-prepare kami for the school festival crap,” angal kong muli.

“Una, you’re not really a Book Reader’s Club member. Pangalawa, lunch time na. At huli, don’t reject me yet again.” His voice became softer as he said the last part. When did I reject him? Uh, yeah. I was rejecting him big time. But still, here we were, playing some bf-gf game. I can’t remember when exactly it started. Kalmado na lang akong sumunod sa kaniya sa cafeteria. It looked like it’s gonna rain dahil medyo gloomy ang paligid. Too bad if it continued until the school festival.

Jin was still holding my arm as we enter the cafeteria. At tulad ng inaasahan, pumukaw na naman kami ng atensyon. Maybe because he’s Jin Cast, a Dark Monarch member and I am Summer Leondale, the---well, I’m just Summer Leondale. No need to down myself.

Dumiretso kami sa table na kinaroroonan ni Zach at Brent. Agad kaming nagpalitan ng masamang tingin ni Brent. How can I forget the freaking welcome party?This bloody coward really got on my nerves. Ipinaghila ako ni Jin ng upuan at nang umupo ako ay umupo na rin siya sa tabi ko. It turned out that I was seated between Jin and Zach, and Brent was just a punch away in front of me.

“Ano’ng ginagawa niya rito?” Hindi maitago ang disgusto ni Brent sa presensiya ko. Zach was just having his coffee obliviously while reading a book. Well, another thing about Montello gangsters, they also read books. I thought they were only supposed to be stupid.

“Chill, Brent. Napag-usapan na natin ito, di ba?” Wika ni Jin.

“At hindi ko rin naman pinipilit na i-welcome ang sarili ko rito,” sagot ko rin.

“I don’t really understand why you like her. She’s stupid. Well, she may be hot and pretty but not that hot and pretty! She’s… trouble,” naiiling na wika ni Brent.

Mataman kong sinalubong ang tingin ni Brent. Normally, I would grab some hard stuff and break it on his face. Mukhang nag-iimprove na ako sa pagko-kontrol ng emotions dahil tiningnan ko lang siya at sinabing, “Are you scared of me?”

He seemed to be caught off-guard dahil hindi siya kaagad sumagot. Ngumiti lang si Jin at masuyong pinisil ang baba ko. I frowned at him.

“Don’t scare him too much. You might give him trauma and heart attack,” wika ni Jin na agad kinontra ni Brent.

“I’m not scared of her, dude!”

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. Take that from Sun Tzu. Alam niyo ba ang ibig kong sabihin? Manahimik na lang kayo at magpalitan ng matatalim na tingin. Iniistorbo nyo ang aking pagbabasa,” biglang sabi ni Zach na nagbaba ng librong hawak para harapin kami.

Take that from the Dark Monarch leader. Don’t tell me nagpapalitan lang ng masasamang tingin ang Black Government at Dark Monarch?

“You’re reading the Art of War, Dude?” Tanong ni Jin. Itinuro ni Zach ang libro na nasa mesa.

“No, I’m eating it,” seryoso niyang sagot.

“Nag-a-attempt ka bang magbiro, Zach?” Seryoso ring tanong ni Jin.

“Hindi. I’m just knocking some common sense into you, Jin. Mukha kasing nawawalan ka na nun nitong mga nakaraang araw. Hindi ko rin inaasahan na dadalhin mo siya rito,” wika ni Zach na pinatutungkulan ako. I know for sure that I would be unwelcome. It’s just because of Jin. Maybe he’s really losing his mind.

“After last time na iniwan ka niya sa mismong ganitong senaryo at sa halip ay pinili niya yung batang freshman— wow, Dude! You’re really falling for this bitch,” wika ni Brent. I wish it’s lawful to kill jerks.

“Look, Brent. Just learn to show respect. She’s my girlfriend now. She might be a bitch but compared to who? To your past time girls?” Jin said. He looked a little pissed off. I could have agreed with him, but then.

“You think I’m a bitch?” Inis kong tanong.

“No, I just— Well, hey! The ‘bitch’ term is universal!” Depensa ni Jin.

“Well, I think you’re a jerk.”

“I’m not. I’m a gentleman— handsome and noble.”

“Can’t do anything about that. Jerk is a pronoun especially made for you,” wika kong muli. Sometime in this conversation, I realized I was having fun. Well, maybe not fun. Parang nakita ko na rin ang sarili ko na hindi na tumututol kapag binabanggit ni Jin na girlfriend niya ako. Hindi sa tinatanggap ko na ang ideya na nasa isang relasyon kami. Medyo nasasanay na lang ako sa ilusyon niya. I think I became a little comfortable around him.

And the lunch went on like this: Jin playing the sick, sweet routine towards me while I was managing to swallow some blueberry cheesecake, Brent throwing dagger stares to me and Zach concentrating on his book. It was a weird scene, actually.

Nasa puntong tinatapos ko na ang lunch ko nang may nagsalita sa aking likuran.

“What are you playing now? Changing courts?” Wika ng nang-iinsultong boses. I rolled my eyes nang mapagsino ko ang may ari ng tinig.

“Hey, Miss President. How’s it going?” Normal na tanong ni Jin na parang palagi na niya iyong ginagawa.

“New girl to hit on? Just make sure that you won’t ruin the school’s morale.” Trinity said in a formal way, as if her advice was from the best of intentions.

“I’m dating Summer, seriously,” pormal ding wika ni Jin.

“Concern lang ako, Mr. Cast. Mainly, sa kaayusan at reputasyon ng Montello High. After her little stunt that dragged the name of our school into police reports, hindi mo mai-aalis sa akin bilang presidente ng student council ang magbigay ng safety warnings. Ang daming gulo ang nangyari

simula nang dumating siya rito," wika niya. I could have eaten her words at sisihin ang sarili ko katulad ng ginawa ko dati. But I've grown up some courage and some confidence in myself that I could also do something good, na pwede rin akong gumawa ng tamang hakbang.

"It wasn't her fault, Trinity," wika ni Jin. Kung paninindigan niya ang pagiging boyfriend ko, mukhang kailangan niya akong depensahan sa maraming bagay.

"I told you, she's trouble," panggagatong ni Brent.

"Summer Leondale. You should realize that the things you did reflected in to Montello High. It brought chaos to the whole campus. It's time for you to think on the consequences of what you did."

Taas-noo kong hinarap si Trinity habang inaakusahan niya ako. Well, she doesn't even know half the things that I knew and at that, she was pitiful.

"Your concern for the school is obvious. But there are some things you should know about Montello High. Matagal nang mayroon kaguluhan sa Montello High. At wala kang ideya kung gaano kalaki ang gulong iyon. Being the president of the student council won't even solve it.

Because if you could, then you should have been the one who rescued Mirden. You should have been more informed about Andrew Novou's death or the cause of the wreckage at the cafeteria. But what? Instead, you are posing your concerns without knowing even the tiniest hint of the truth." She seemed surprised at my words. Pero ano nga ba ang alam niya? Muli akong nagpatuloy.

"Tungkol naman sa deadly stunt ko, well, I did it to save Mirden. I guess I tend to protect those people around me. That is what you call 'concern.' Hell, hindi rin ako magdadalawang isip na protektahan si Jamie kapag mayroong sumaling sa kaniya. Naiintindihan mo ba ang ipinupunto ko, Miss President?"

"Sinabi ko lang kay Jamie ang mga bagay na dapat niyang ma-realize; na hindi makabubuti sa kaniya ang mapalapit sa iyo." Mukhang isa si Trinity

sa mga bitches na tinutukoy ni Jamie kanina.

“Tell me, Miss Domingo. Kailan pa nagkaroon ng kapangyarihan ang Student Council President na paki-alaman ang pagpili ng estudyante ng taong makakasama nito? I’m sorry but as far as I can see it, you’re just a props for the school unless you happen to show some effectivity.” Now, I got her. She looked really surprised on my vocal accusations. Pero ano bang magagawa ko kung iyon talaga ang opinyon ko? Napansin ko ring ibinabang muli ni Zach ang librong binabasa niya at itinuon ang atensiyon sa palitan namin ng salita ng student council president.

“Wala kang karapatang insultuhin ang council,” wika ni Trinity. Isang lame na sagot. Nauubusan na ba siya ng idea o wala na siyang ibang alam na paraan upang ipagtanggol ang council mula sa mga sinabi ko?

“This girl is really a bad-ass. I hate it.” Narinig kong mahinang komento ni Brent. Obviously, Trinity was caught in a shameful situation as every pair of eyes in the cafeteria were waiting for some logical response from her. Yung medyo mas matalino sa huli niyang sinabi.

“What’s happening here?” Hindi ko napansin ang pagdating ng Black Government. And maybe, Ethan was here for some rescue. After all, he was the Vice President. Makki was just sitting on a table across from us, having his I-don’t-care-look. And Van, well, he was just beside Makki, silently watching us with unreadable expression.

“Miss Leondale just insulted the student council,” sagot ni Trinity sa boses na pigil ang galit. Pumormal ang mukha ni Ethan and I could see now a Vice President of the student organization.

“Summer, we value student rights pero hindi rin naman namin pahihintulutan ang ganito,” wika ni Ethan. He really was using his authority now.

“One of the student rights should be the freedom to have their own opinion,” wika ko kasabay ng pagtayo at hinarap siya. Jin abruptly got up on my side.

“Pero kung mayroon ka mang opinyon ay maaari mo iyong idulog sa Student Council office. I can always spare some time to talk to you about it. Not like this, giving destructive words in a public place,” sagot ni Ethan.

Sasagot pa sana ako subalit tumayo si Zach kasunod si Brent.

“I’m not being biased here and you know that I never really care about this kind of things. But the president started this so you should talk to her first. Or maybe I could suggest for you to have a meeting with the council and review your agenda. Leondale just spilled her thoughts in a logical way. Whether it hurts your ego, we don’t really care.

Jin, take the girl. Let’s leave this to them,” wika ni Zach. Halos hindi ako makagalaw sa pagkagulat. Hindi naging biased si Zach but he was obviously on my side! Maybe he was really a man of reasons. I remember him doing good on his promise to leave me alone if I win their bloody game. I would admit, Zach Martinia was a sensible guy.

Nagsimula na kaming humakbang palabas ng cafeteria. Subalit bago ako tuluyang umalis ay nilingon ko ang kinaroroonan ng taong iyon. I saw Trinity on his side and was surprised to feel a sudden rage. Binawi ko ang tingin at saka diretsong naglakad.

Nagpaalam sina Zach at Jin sa isa’t-isa. Zach and Brent went to who knows where habang kami ni Jin ay bumalik sa Book Reader’s Club.

“I didn’t expect that from Zach,” wika ko. Normally, hindi ako ang nagbubukas ng conversation pero hindi lang talaga ako maka-get over kaagad sa nangyari.

“Zach is a man of sense. He sees things, he studies things, he weighs things and then judge them. It’s like a process. He’s clever,” sagot ni Jin. Naalala ko rin ang pagpigil ni Zach sa ibang miyembro ng Dark Monarch na bugbugin pa ako after the ten minute mark, maging noong hinayaan niya akong makapasok ng boy’s dormitory. Maybe Jin was right about him.

“He could be smarter than me but I got wits and creativity. So please, Summer, huwag mo na siyang iisipin. I’m here you know,” wika ni Jin. I

just rolled my eyes at him.

“Sure, Sweetheart. You’ll always be on my murderous mind,” sagot ko at saka pumasok sa Book Reader’s Club HQ para ipagpatuloy ang paggupit ng stars.

[28] Chapter 28: Mercy Falls

Warning: You may have missed Chapter 27: Insurgency. Go back one chapter para di ka maguluhan sa chapter na ito. (editor)

Author’s Note:

This chapter is inspired by One Republic Songs. I could see stories from nowhere just by listening to them. And people, vote for Mayu! I would really appreciate it.

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 28: Mercy Falls

Today was finally the School Festival. Hindi ako napilit ni Mirden na magparticipate sa operation ng booth. Because seriously, I can’t make coffee for others. I can’t do Math. And I just couldn’t give service to people. Mainly because I don’t want to. But she had Jamie and Tyler as part of the service crew. And well, Jin Cast as my substitute. Para lang tigilan ako ni Mirden sa pangungulit ay itinaya ko ang buhay ni Jin, who wholeheartedly accepted.

Apparently, it was a busy School Festival for everybody while it was a NO CLASS day for me. Tanghali na akong gumising kung kaya naman wala na sina Mirden at Jamie sa kanilang higaan. I took my time preparing to go outside my dorm room. Nang lumabas ako ay nakita ko na mukhang abala ang lahat. There were also outsiders— mainly from other schools na bumibisita sa Montello High. Hindi ko masasabing maraming tao sa campus dahil ang nakikita ko lang ay mukhang mga fan girls at yung iba naman ay tipong mga street gangsters. But what can you expect from Montello High? It would definitely take courage to enter this place.

Nagulat ako nang biglang may humawak sa braso ko mula sa likuran at kaladkarin ako. “What the hell! Let go!” Sigaw ko. Hindi ko alam kung matatakot ako o magagalit nang mapagsino ang lapastangang humawak sa akin. It was the devil. Ano bang kailangan niya? And why is he dragging me?

“Van Freniere! You freaking mushroom!” Sigaw ko sa kaniya. Nakakuha na kami ng atensiyon. The wide school ground was teeming with booths and visitors. At mukhang ang school ground ang tinatahak naming landas. Pinilit kong i-preno ang aking mga paa kahit sumakit pa ito dahil sa medyo malakas na pagkakahila sa akin ni Van.

“Ow!” Daing ko nang mapaluhod ako dahil sa hindi niya pagtigil. Agad naman siyang huminto nang marinig ang daing ko atsaka lumingon sa paligid.

“Get up, Leondale,” utos niya.

“What do you want?” Inis kong sabi subalit hindi pa rin ako tumatayo. Nanatili lang akong nakaluhod sa lupa. I didn’t really want to get up. He might drag me again.

“Wag ka nang magtanong. Tumayo ka na riyan,” marahan at seryoso niyang wika subalit naroon na rin ang panganib sa boses niya.

“No! You can’t just drag me without—” Hindi ko na naituloy ang anumang sasabihin ko. In just a nano-second, he was able to lift me off the ground and carry me with my stomach on his shoulder and my head against his back. I wasn’t able to speak beacuse the action just knocked my air way. Seriously! May ideya ba siya tungkol sa human rights?

Nang magsimula na siyang maglakad ay nagawa ko na ring mahanap ang boses ko. “Hey, Devil! You will pay for this,” galit na sabi ko.

“I can pay whatever the cost.” Narinig kong sagot niya. Yeah, yeah. Too cliche. The devil can do everything.

I recited a million curses against the devil hanggang sa makarating kami sa coffee shop ng Book Reader’s Club. Okay, so why did he bring me here?

“Kuya Van.” Nakita ko ang agad na paglapit ni Tyler. Mayroon na ring mangilan-ngilang customers sa booth. They must be geeks or nerds. Binigyan lang nila kami ng saglit na tingin at itinuloy ang kanilang binabasa. They were definitely lost in their own worlds.

Hindi pa rin ako ibinababa ni Van nang makita ko sina Jin, Mirden at Jamie na papalapit. Jin looked pissed when he saw my awkward situation with Van.

“Bitiwan mo siya, Freniere!” Pigil ang galit na wika ni Jin. Way to go, my bloody boyfriend.

Saglit na nagsukatan ng tingin sina Jin at Van. Nagulat ako ng bitiwan ako ni Van at patihaya akong bumagsak sa lupa. What the hell!

“Crap! Ano bang problema mo, Giovanni?!” Daing ko. Agad namang akong inalalayan patayo ni Jin.

“Can’t you be nicer, Man?!” Galit na wika ni Jin at saka itinulak sa balikat si Van. Tahimik namang nakamasid si Tyler sa kapatid niya, like he was assessing things. But maybe for the eyes of other people who doesn’t have any idea of his relationship with the devil, mukha lang siyang isang scared kid who doesn’t even know what to do on this situation.

Wala namang ginawang aksiyon si Van. Sa halip ay diresto niya lang akong tiningnan sa mata. “Montello High is open. Guardless. Pinapapasok nila ang kahit sino sa araw na ito. If you want to live, just stay here until the festival is over,” wika niya at saka tiningnan si Tyler. Tumango si Tyler tapos ay walang lingon-likod na lumabas ng booth si Van.

“Jerk!” Sigaw ko. Napalingon sa akin ang mga nagbabasa sa booth. I heard someone ‘sssshhh-ed.’

“Screw you, worms,” mahina kong sabi. Ayoko namang sirain ang effort ng Book Reader’s Club sa pagma-manage ng booth na ito.

And so this was how I spent the school festival. Dapat wala akong iniisip sa araw na ito. Dapat wala akong gagawin sa araw na ito. I should have stayed inside the dorm. Like he wouldn't find me. Tahimik na lang akong umupo sa mesang nakapwesto sa pinasulok ng booth. I grabbed a book from a nearby bookshelf. Kung alam ko lang na ikukulong ako rito, sana dinala ko na lang ang Looking for Alaska at tinapos basahin. I'm pretty sure she committed suicide. And I like Colonel more than Fudge. Why does the devil have to be such an expert in poor timing.

"You need a coffee, sweetheart?" Tanong ni Jin na sinundan ako.

"Cappuccino. And some good books to read." Halata pa rin ang inis sa boses ko nang sumagot ako.

"I don't really like that man. But I do trust his judgement," biglang sabi niya na ikinagulat ko. Jin Cast wows me at times, lalo na kapag lumalabas ang pagiging perceptive niya at hindi ang happy-go-lucky niyang side.

"I know. Me, too. Kaya nga titiisin kong iburo ang sarili ko rito sa loob ng mahabang panahon." That was definitely true. I trust Van. I trust him despite the fact the he's a devil. I trust him even though he holds the Mafia in his hands. I trust him… and he's dangerous. And I don't know why I do! Dahil ba wala na akong ibang choice? Because he's the most capable person I could trust in this situation?

"Don't worry. As long as you're with me, I would never let anyone harm you," wika ni Jin. I rolled my eyes at him.

"As long as you're with me, I wouldn't get my cappuccino. So, please."

He stood straight and gave me his dashing smile before saying, "Roger, Ma'am," at saka umalis.

As I was watching him go, I allowed myself to think of him. Jin was really good-looking. I would have liked him in a romantic way. He could have been my boyfriend, I could see the possibility. The two of us in a relationship would have been pretty possible if I was ordinary. And I can see the temptation of living an ordinary, simple life. But everything had

changed for me. Since when did everything change? Hindi ko na matandaan kung kailan eksaktong nagbago ang normal na buhay ko. I was caught up in deep thoughts nang umupo si Tyler sa tabi ko at nilapag ang isang tasa ng kape na may hugis nota na tsokolate sa ibabaw ng foam nito.

“Thanks, but you didn’t have to pull the effort para gumawa ng nota sa kape ko dahil hindi ko iko-consider ang creativity mo. I would still drink it,” wika ko at saka humigop ng kape. It tasted good. Well, lasang kape, but really tastes good.

“I made it. That was one thing I learned from her, making a good cup of coffee,” nakangiti niyang sabi. I bet he’s here not just to serve me a good cup of coffee but also to talk.

“You miss her?” Tanong ko. Alam naming pareho kung sino ang pinag-uusapan namin.

“She’s gone.” Hindi pa rin nagbabago ang ngiti. He was still displaying that childish, naive expression. But I could read him better now.

“That must be hard. Yung hindi mo masabi ang tunay mong nararamdaman,” wika ko.

Hindi siya kaagad sumagot. Sa halip ay naglabas siya ng isang notebook na ang nakalarawan sa cover ay puro mga puno. Inabot niya ito sa akin at nagtataka ko itong tinanggap.

“Para sa iyo yan, Summer. Tama ka. It’s really hard not having someone to talk to. Having such a family, well— But I have things like this so I write. Naisip ko na baka nahihirapan ka rin. Writing would make it less harder, I think,” paliwanag niya nang makita ang nagtatanong kong ekspresyon. But I do these kind of things, too. Like what I do on my phone. Inilalagay ko sa phone ko ang lahat ng insecurities ko kay Autumn. Which, apparently, Van had read. And, he has photographic memory. Tss!

“This is nice.” I know I should have said ‘Thank You’ but the last time I attempted that, hindi maganda ang kinalabasan.

“And here.” Nabigla ako nang abutin niya ang jacket ko at inilagay sa bulsa nito ang isang maliit na baril. Kinapa ko iyon ng aking mga daliri. It felt cold, like death.

“Tyler—” Medyo kinakabahan kong wika subalit pinigil niya ako.

“Everything is going to be fine. Gusto ko lang makasigurado na hindi ka maiiwang walang laban. Sebastian told me na ang sakop lang ng proteksyon ko ay ang Montello High. Iyon lang ang pinayagan niya. So as long as you don’t leave Montello, I can protect you,” wika ni Tyler sa mahinang boses. He was being careful kahit na mukha namang walang nakakarinig sa amin.

“I really appreciate it. Pero hindi ko ito kayang gamitin. No. I don’t think I could even consider myself using this.” Isang bahagyang pagtanggi kahit sinasabi ng utak ko na tama si Tyler.

“Just keep it. We don’t really know what will happen. Importante ka na sa akin, Summer. Maybe nakita ko ang protective side mo which reminded me of her. At ayokong mawalan ulit.” So naiisip pala ng batang ito na reincarnation ako ng kaniyang ina.

“Hindi ako mawawala, Tyler,” I assured him.

“Of course, I would never let you. And Kuya Van would never let it happen. Seeing him like that… you could be his last chance to be human.” Kumunot ang noo ko sa sinabi niya. Well, tawagin na akong ignorante pero parang sinabihan niya ako ng isang bugtong at hindi ko malaman ang sagot.

“Ha?” Tangi ko lang sagot. Ngumiti lang siya at saka tumayo.

“Make sure the safety is off when you use my gift. Hintayin mo lang ang club presentation at performances mamayang gabi and then everything will surely be fine.” Huh? Presentation? Performances? Okay, I was a Junior High Student at wala akong ideya sa mga school activities at school events. Sino bang nililoko ko? Algebra nga na araw-araw isinasaksak sa utak ko ay wala akong ideya, ito pa kayang school festival na anually lang dumarating.

I spent almost the whole day not with a good book but with writing. Writing everything that happened. Writing a story about a girl who found herself in the middle of deadly labyrinth. She doesn't know how to get out. She couldn't get out. Or maybe there's really no way out. But since there was no way out, she would try breaking the walls of the maze. She will break it until she finds an escape. That would be dangerous, though. Bakit ba ako napasok sa ganitong sitwasyon?

"It's getting dark. I think we should be ready." Hindi ko na halos namalayan ang presensiya nina Jin, Mirden, Jamie at Tyler sa harap ko.

"Ready for what?" Bakit ba masyadong madaming ginagawa sa festival na ito?

"Performance night. Ngayon ka lang ba nakaranas ng school activities?" Tanong ni Jamie. Hindi ako sumagot. And what should I answer? Na wala akong kahit na anong activities na sinalihan sa datin kong eskwelahan? Na wala akong kahit na anong ideya sa mga ginagawang aktibidades ng school?

Sumunod na lang ako sa kanila matapos nilang iwan ang coffee shop sa iba pang club members. I should have stayed and written more. Pero dahil sa sinabing sitwasyon ni Van kanina, tumanim sa utak ko na kinakailangan kong maging malapit sa grupo. Paglabas namin ay nakita ko ang isang malaking stage na nakaset-up sa malawak na ground. Mas dumami ang tao kumpara noong may liwanag pa. Mukhang performance night talaga ang inaabangan ng mga tao. But wait, performance of who?

Lumapit kami sa stage. Isang grupo ang naroon at kumakanta. They were actually doing good. And they looked familiar. Well, yeah. Sila yung nagperform dati sa 6th floor kahit nagkakaroon na ng riot.

... When it all falls down, to the sunrise from the east side… Would you be there to carry home… The remains of my wasted youth, this wasted time on you has left me… shaking and waiting, shaking and waiting for something more…

Hindi ko alam kung mayroong hiptonismo ang vocalist ng banda dahil natigil lang ako sa kinatatayuan ko at naalala ang mga nangyari noong gabing iyon. The devil protected me that time. The devil danced with me through this song. It was an acoustic rock song pero nagawa pa rin namin iyong isayaw.

... Tonight is alive with the promise of the streetfight, and there's money on the table said your cheap shots won't be able to break bones, I've yet to break a sweat… I'll make your past regret its future… And here's to you…

I don't know why I was remembering these things. Parang kinukompronta ako ng weird na nararamdaman ko dati. It was really strange. Inilagay ko ang palad ko sa tapat ng aking dibdib. My freaking heart was beating freaking faster. Nagpatuloy lang ang banda sa pagpeperform. Para ngang nag-evaporate ang lahat sa paligid ko and there was only me, the song and a slideshow of memories with the devil

"I think this is bad," wika ko nang matapos ang kanta.

"I don't think so. Mikhail is really good on this field. He's from the music club," kontra ni Jamie sa iniisip niyang ibig kong sabihin.

"And he's a freaking Black Government. So yeah, that's bad." Narinig kong wika ni Jin. Well, that's really bad.

"Wala naman akong alam sa music. Hinihintay ko lang yung fireworks display," biglang sabi ni Tyler.

"Tell that to the coffee and musical note you made for Summer," wika ni Mirden. Jin reacted like a really jealous boyfriend.

"You made a move on my girlfriend, Kid?" Tanong ni Jin. Tyler just frowned like the innocent kid he was.

"Pwede ba, Jin," pigil ko sa tangkang paghawak sa balikat ni Jin kay Tyler. Inilibot ko ang paningin ko. Simula nang kaladkarin niya ako sa coffeeshop ay hindi ko na siya nakita. Where is he? Is everything alright? And why the hell am I looking for him?!

“This is really bad,” mahina kong naisatinig muli.

Jin put his hand on my cheek and smiled. Kelan pa siya naglevel up at nagkaroon ng lakas ng loob para hawakan ako?

“Do you want me to sing for you?” Tanong niya. Nakita kong nagpapalit ng band performer sa stage and I saw Zach holding the mic. Dark Monarch. Wait, so Zach can also sing?

“Just don’t touch me,” angal ko. Ngumiti lang si Jin at saka tumakbo papuntang stage.

“Uh, what is he doing?” Tanong ko sa mga kasama ko. “Is he really going to sing?” Tanong ko pa nang makita kong ibinigay ni Zach kay Jin ang mic. Si Jin at Zach lang ang nakita kong Dark Monarch sa stage. The other two were, maybe, normal students.

“History club. Normally, si Zach ang kumakanta. But Jin is pretty good, too,” paliwanag ni Mirden. So even a gangster could also be a member of a good and educational club. Akala ko ‘Torture Club’ o ‘ Bloody Welcome Party’ ang expertise nila. I even saw Ethan Montreal and I think he also saw me. Subalit wala akong balak na magkaroon ng discussion with him right now. Especially when Jin is at the stage, singing for me. Hindi na ako makapaghintay na sumigaw ng ‘Boo.’

“Fireworks in a few minutes.” Narinig kong wika ni Tyler. Mukhang dalawa kaming sisigaw ng ‘Boo!’ Nagsimula nang tumugtog sina Zach while Jin was staring at my direction.

“Zach is really good with guitars.” Narinig kong wika ni Jamie. I think she was having a crush on the gangster. And I could see the sense for her to have a crush on him. He seemed logical and a one-word-man. He reads the ‘Art of War’ and he could play guitar.

...Angel of Mercy, how did you find me? Where did you read my story? Pulled from the papers, desperate and hardened… Seeking a momentary fix…

Anumang pambu-boo ay naipit sa lalamunan ko. I was impressed. Jin Cast has a voice. Para rin siyang merong fans club dahil sa mga kinikilig na tilian sa paligid. Mukhang mataas ang market value niya, magkano kaya kung ibebenta ko siya?

The fireworks started which really matched the song and the band. Mirden and Jamie seemed to be caught up with the almost magical ambience. Well, I'll admit. Having a guy sing for you under the fireworks was pretty magical. Even Tyler seemed intent. Pero mukhang sa fireworks lang interesado si Tyler. He was intently watching and listening to every explosion. And he was so damned serious.

...All I wanted to say, all I wanted to do has fallen apart now… All I wanted to feel, I wanted to love, It's all my fault now…

And then Tyler burst away running. Fast and Silent. So silent I could almost not hear it.

...A tragedy I fear…

But I heard and I saw it. This time, kailangan kong biguin at i-reject muli si Jin. Tumakbo rin ako at sinundan si Tyler. Walang paki-alam ang lahat sa amin. Mukhang nakuha ng fireworks at musika ang atensiyon ng lahat. Nakita kong patungo si Tyler sa Nightwoods. Crap! Nightwoods again? I hate this place! Dito ay malinaw pa ring naririnig ang boses ni Jin.

...Angel of Mercy, how did you find me? How did you pick me up again? Angel of Mercy, how did you move me? Why am I on my feet again?...

Tumigil si Tyler at saka lumingon sa akin. He was damned serious and dangerous. "Why, Tyler?" Humihingal kong tanong.

"Hindi ka dapat sumunod, Summer. There were gunshots while the fireworks was happening. At dito nagmula. Mukhang sinadya nilang isabay sa fireworks upang walang ibang magsuspetsa," wika niya. Yeah, he got the ability to distinguish a gunshot and the noise from the fireworks. He was a mafia reaper, all right.

... And I see you, whoah… And I feel you, whoah…

Hinawakan niya ako sa braso at hinila patakbo. This time, malinaw ko nang napapakinggan ang putok. Hindi mula sa fireworks kundi dito mismo sa Nightwoods. Matinding takot ang agad na bumalot sa akin.

“Bilis, Summer! Shit! They’re trapping us!” Wika ni Tyler. Bunga ng adrenaline rush ay mas binilisan ko pa ang pagtakbo. The gunshot, they were now flying towards us.

...Fortress of daylight, caught me on standby… Waiting to catch the quickest plane…

Tyler suddenly stopped and seven men in masks got out from the shadows. HIndi ko alam kung paano nila nagawa yun subalit ngawa nila kaming palibutan. Tyler kept me behind his back kahit na wala naman iyong sense dahil napapaligiran na kami. Naglabas ang iba ng baril at tatlo sa kanila ay naglabas ng katana. I wasn’t dumbed not to recognize them. Sila ang assasins na ipinadala ng organisasyon. They pointed their guns on us habang humakbang palapit sa amin ang mga may dala ng tila napakatalas na mga katana.

“I’m dead,” mahina kong sabi.

“I won’t let that happen,” sagot ni Tyler and he pushed me to the ground while he tried to dodge the blades. He was protecting me and I couldn’t do anything!

...Try me to nowhere, it’s better than somewhere… That’s where I’ve been and nothing’s changed…

Tyler was doing good on defending ourselves. Of course, he’s a mafia reaper. He’s invincible. Until a gunshot.

“Tyler!” I screamed nang makita kong natamaan si Tyler sa tagiliran. I couldn’t take it! It was like I’m seeing blood and death all over again. And I was just watching, sitting, almost beside a huge tree while Tyler remained

standing in front of me defending… Naramdaman kong kumawala ang luha sa di kumukurap kong mata.

...All I wanted to say, all I wanted to do has fallen apart now… All I wanted to feel, I wanted to love, It's all my fault now… A tragedy for sure…

Sa kabila ng tama ni Tyler ay nagawa pa rin niyang maagaw ang isa sa mga katana. Nakita ko kung paano niya kadaling napaslang ang isa sa mga assasins. Nakita ko rin kung gaano unti-unting lumalaki ang bahid ng dugo sa kaniyang tagiliran. But he still fought like the reaper that he is. Tila hindi niya iniinda ang anumang natamo niya. Gusto kong sumuko na lang pero paano ako susuko kung sinasabi ng mukha niya na "Everything's going to be alright"?

...Angel of Mercy, how did you find me? How did you pick me up again? Angel of Mercy, how did you move me? Why am I on my feet again?...

The mafia reaper finished three samurais. I couldn't move because of the death that I was seeing. I thought it was over. Subalit may apat pang natitira at sabay-sabay nilang pinaputukan si Tyler sa katawan. I was screaming… with no sound. Do you know how that feels? Napaluhod si Tyler subalit muli siyang tumayo. And in a quick move, nagawa niyang mapaslang gamit ng katanang mahigpit niyang hawak ang isa sa mga assasins na nagtangkang lumapit sa amin.

... And I see you, whoah… And I feel you, whoah…

He was all covered in blood. And I was covered in tears and horror. What am I going to do? I should do something! Anything! I couldn't be petrified by fears. Tyler had been protecting me for so long. And he couldn't do it anymore. It was now my turn to save him! Pero anong gagawin ko? With all my bravery that's left, tumayo ako sa likod ni Tyler to catch him. Sa natitirang lakas niya ay inihagis niya ang katana sa taong nagtangkang barilin ako nung sinubukan kong kumilos. It pierced the chest of the assasin at it left Tyler without a weapon. Defenseless. The others aimed their guns at us subalit mahigpit akong niyakap ni Tyler bago tuluyang magpaputok ang dalawang natitirang assasins.

...I’m so lost in you… A tragedy it seemed to be…

Halos hindi ko na naramdaman ang pagtama ng bala sa braso ko na nakayakap kay Tyler. Gayundin sa aking hita. At sigurado rin akong halos hindi na rin maramdaman ni Tyler ang mga balang bumabaon sa likod niya. Nakapa ko ang metal na bagay sa bulsa ng jacket ko. Was this what Tyler was talking about? Umiiyak na inilabas ko iyon and pulled the safety off. With a blood shed hand and tear-blinded eyes, I raised the tiny gun towards the assasins. I pulled the trigger. Then pulled it again. And pulled. Hanggang sa wala na akong marinig na putok. I cleared my eyes. Wala na ang dalawa sa paningin ko. Maybe they decided to leave. Maybe they were satisfied with what they’ve done already.

...but what now? What now?...

We fell to the ground, me holding Tyler tightly. He was still breathing and he was trying to say something.

” Tyler, I’m sorry,” umiiyak kong sabi.

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“D-don’t be. E-everything… b-be… f-fine,” pilit niyang sagot. My heart was breaking! I couldn’t breath! How can I save him?! Hell, no! I couldn’t save Tyler anymore! With a swollen, teary eyes, I decided to tell him that one thing I’m not used to say.

“Thank you… Thank you because you saved me. Thank you…” I cried. I could say this to him without ending. Just to not let him go. “Thank you for protecting me… Thank you… Thank you…”

Ngumiti si Tyler. And with one last gasping breath, he closed his eyes. His calm and bloodied face was saying, “Everything’s going to be fine.” He was the hope I was holding on! Hindi ako makapaniwala! So this is it? This is the end of it?!

“Tell me, it’s not! Please, tell me this isn’t true!” Tila baliw kong bulong at saka niyakap ang wala nang buhay na si Tyler. Did it just happen again? Did I cause another death?

...A tragedy it seemed to be, but what now?...

And the song ended. I couldn’t hear Jin’s beautiful voice anymore. The colorful and enchanting fireworks faded. Ganun kabilis. In just one song and a fireworks display, Tyler’s youthful days vanished. It was too damned fast.

Ang ulan na kahapon pa nagbabanta ay tuluyan nang nalaglag. And I felt as if I was drowning in a pool of blood with dead bodies floating around me. I was holding on to Tyler like I could still bring him back. And I cried… hard.

The gun, the notebook with a cover full of woods, the musical note on my coffee.

The mafia reaper had fallen.

[29] Chapter 29: Safe and Danger Zone

Author’s Note:

Have I told you that OneRepublic songs are love? Well, I'll say it again because 'Say (All I Need)' of OneRepublic fit this chapter. Listen to it and I wanna hear your opinion.

And congratulations to the game winners! Fatima, Hannah and Shana!

Deliveries are coming! Oh boy, I wish I could send one of the gangsters!

Also, since Montello just celebrated its first anniversary, I have a vide message for all of you, gangstahs! Check this out on facebook: http://bit.ly/Wf8h0w

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 29: Safe and Danger Zone

One of the saddest Saturdays. It was so gloomy and painful. Sa sobrang sakit ni hindi ko magawang magsalita. Nakahiga lang ako sa hospital bed and I was staring at the vague nothingness. I was wide awake. I was very much aware of the things that were happening around me.

Last night, Montello High School guards checked the campus ground when curfew came. That was when they found me. Us. Halos isang oras din pala ako sa ganoong posisiyon. Hindi. Dalawang oras? Tatlo? Ganun rin ang itinagal ng aking pag-iyak. But when did I stop crying? I couldn't remember. Kagabi ay halos hindi ko na alam ang nangyayari sa paligid ko. Ang tangi ko lang nararamdaman ay ang nangyayari sa akin.

Narinig ko na lang ang malalakas na sigaw sa pangalan ko habang nakahiga sa stretcher. I thought I was dead until they carried me to the ambulance. Ilang minuto lang matapos akong dalhin sa ospital ay dumating din si Daddy. He thought I couldn't see him even though my eyes were open. That was how fast he flew towards me. Imagine his reaction when he saw his delinquent daughter covered in blood and gunshots? It was like seeing God getting worried for his beloved Children. So he cares for me, after all.

He was crying when my tears stopped. Everyone was on panic. And I was left wondering why since I was just shot on my leg and arm. Not that fatal,

right? I didn’t know that I also got shot on my shoulder. Hanggang doon lang ang nakita ko kagabi bago ko ipinikit ang aking mga mata. It turned out that I lost too much blood. When I woke up, I saw Dad and Mom talking to the Doctor. Autumn smiled beside me.

“You’re safe now, Sweetie. We’re here,” wika niya. Lumapit na rin sa hospital bed sina Mommy and Daddy.

“How are you feeling, Miss Leondale?” Tanong ng Doktor. But I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. Nakatingin lang ako sa kaniya. Nagtatanong na tumingin sa doktor ang pamilya ko.

“She’s still in shock. For a seventeen year old to witness such brutality, it’s normal for her to have that reaction. But don’t worry, she’ll get around to herself when she’s ready. Anyway, she is a strong girl,” paliwanag ng doktor. No medical terms, no complications. There was nothing to worry about, that was how I decoded his meaning.

My family acted normally and professionally regarding my condition. But not until the doctor got out of the room and closed the door. My Mom-my oh-so-beautiful mom-hugged me tightly. Autumn caressed my cheeks while Dad just chose to watch us. I couldn’t read what he was thinking.

“May gusto ka ba, anak? May masakit ba sa’yo?” Tanong ni Mama.

May masakit ba sa akin? Well, I feel my whole body aching. But there was something else, something beyond this physical pain. At may gusto ba ako? Maybe I just want this pain to fade away. And I really want to talk to this person.

“That must be painful. Kung pwede ko lang hatian ka sa sakit na nararamdaman mo. Mom, how long do you think will it take for her to recover?” Ani Autumn. She was always this good.

“I don’t know. She will surprise us, you’ll see. She will recover fast,” confident na sagot ni Mama. I tried to paint a smile on my face. They smiled back. Yes, I will recover in light speed.

Lumapit si Daddy and touched my cheek. He seemed scared and careful that he might hurt me. But I gave him a very slight smile. It was really not normal. Napaka-benevolent namin ni Daddy ngayon. I almost cried.

“I’m sorry, anak. It was all my fault,” wika niya. Gusto kong umiling at sabihing wala siyang kasalanan. Crap, I think I’m getting soft pero wala naman talaga siyang kasalanan.

“You’re not going back to that school again.” Hindi ko alam kung bakas ang pagkagulat sa mukha ko. I wanted to protest. I didn’t want to leave Montello High. My friends were there, and after everything that happened, I was now willing to acknowledge them as my friends. Funny thing. You wouldn’t know what they mean for you until you lost one of them. Until you are going to lose all of them.

“Maybe she can go to Arturia,” wika ni Autumn.

“And what? Do you think she’ll fit in there? Do you think our baby will be happy in that school?” Tanong ni Mama. Am I going to fit in there? Pero matagal ko nang gustong makapasok sa Arturia, diba? Hindi ba’t iyon ang dahilan kung bakit ako nagrerebelde at pinipiling magpakick-out sa bawat school na napasukan ko? For my father to send me to Arturia. But everything had changed. Will I be happy there?

“That would be a good plan. Dapat matagal ko nang ginawa ito. Hindi na sana humantong sa ganito. She always wanted to go to Arturia,” malungkot na saad ni Daddy. Halatang-halata ang guilt na nararamdaman niya sa mukha niya. It was one of the things I was only discovering about my father. He could always calculate everything, a man who was so damn sure of what he wants and what he does. Well, now, he was obviously doubting the decisions he made about my life. Like sending me to Montello High School.

“I can settle the paperworks. Kapag magaling na siya, I will make sure na enrolled na siya sa Arturia,” pagpi-presenta ni Autumn. Nagpatuloy sila sa pagdi-disisyon sa magiging buhay ko paglabas ng ospital. Sure, it was tiring to hear your life being decided by others. In normal cases, I would rebel against it. But right now, I just felt so tired and weak. And I was in terrible

pain. I didn’t even know what to do. So maybe, I should just let them. I would let them decide everything since I couldn’t.

Hindi ko na naintindihan ang iba pang detalye ng pinag-usapan nila. Naramdaman ko na lang ang pagbigat ng talukap ng aking mga mata hanggang sa tuluyan na akong makatulog. Ilang minuto ang lumipas at muli kong iminulat ang aking mga mata. I was on the school festival’s performance night. And this innocent, little kid was beside me. Naramdaman ko ang kagustuhang hawakan siya. Yung pakiramdam na gusto ko siyang protektahan mula sa mga tao sa paligid namin. I couldn’t tell the boy’s name, I just felt that I knew him well.

Hinawakan ko ang kamay niya at humawak rin siya nang mahigpit. His face was so calm. It was like he was thinking of nothing but happiness. It seemed that he was enjoying the things happening around him. There was a band on the stage but I couldn’t name the title of the song they were playing. All I know was that it was beautiful and we had ears to appreciate it.

Suddenly, the smooth song became menacingly loud. Mas humigpit ang kapit ko sa kamay ng bata sa tabi ko. I couldn’t lose him. Nagkagulo ang paligid. Tumatakbo ang lahat, tumatakas. There was only that scary song and screaming and panic. And then out of nowhere, a big snake approached us. But we’re not moving. Inuutusan ng utak ko ang sarili ko na tumakbo subalit hindi ako makagalaw. Hindi ko magawang ihakbang ang aking mga paa. Hinili ko ang bata patago sa likuran ko at buong tapang kong hinarap ang paparating na ahas. I thought it was going to attack me. But it curved away and grabbed the child with its sharp and venomous fangs. Pinilit kong huwag mabitawan ang kamay ng bata.

“No!” Sigaw ko habang kinakaladkad kami ng ahas. I could see the scratches on my body now subalit wala akong maramdamang kirot. I was just crying and screaming. I couldn’t let this child go. Mukhang napansin ng bata ang paghihirap ko at ang pagpipilit kong sagipin siya. Nabura ang takot sa mukha niya at binigyan ako ng ngiti.

“Salamat, Summer,” wika niya. It was not that little child anymore who was talking. It was Tyler. And then he let my hand go.

“No!!!” Narinig ko ang sarili kong sigaw. At naramdaman ko ang malakas na pagyugyog sa balikat ko.

“Summer! Summer, wake up!” And I did wake up. Damn nightmares. Why do good things end up in a horrible way!

“D-daddy…” Pareho kaming nasorpresa ni Daddy nang marinig naming muli ang boses ko. My cursing and bitching voice was back. Excellent.

“Ah, thank God! Don’t worry, I’m here,” wika niya. Of course, I would be fine. He was here. I was sure that nothing could harm me. Pero bakit walang bumabanggit sa akin ng nangyari?

“D-dad… Tyler…” Wika ko sa mahinang boses. Hindi ko alam kung paano sisimulan ang pagtatanong tungkol kay Tyler kaya binanggit ko na lang ang pangalan niya.

“Nagugutom ka ba? Umuwi muna saglit sa bahay ang Mama at Ate-”

I cut him off. “Dad… Don’t be so lenient with me. I’m tougher than you give me credit for,” wika ko. Alam kong nagiging maingat lang sila dahil sa kalagayan ko. Pero ilang beses na ba akong napunta sa ganitong sitwasyon? I think ‘practice makes perfect’ works on me.

“Yeah… I guess we underestimated you,” tumatangong wika ni Daddy. Hindi ako sumagot. Hinintay ko lang siyang magsalita. “About that boy, he was probably your good friend. I called the school and the police said that…”

“Dad, please…” Impatient kong putol.

Huminga muna siya ng malalim bago nagsalita. “He’s dead. He was very young but now, he’s gone,” malumanay niyang wika. Saglit kaming natahimik. I bit my lip to prevent myself from crying. But it hurts. My eyes were hot and it was painful. Freaking tears! Can’t I just pee later?

“You can cry, Summer,” biglang sabi ni Daddy. And hell! It was like a trigger. A password for my tears to fall.

“W-why do y-you have to tell me that I can cry?” Wika ko sa pagitan ng pag-iyak.

“Because I’m your father. What’s the sense of you calling me, ‘Daddy’ if you can’t cry in front of me?” Wika niya.

“Dad… I did it again.” I let my tears flow this time, without constriction. And Dad understood what I was saying.

“It’s definitely not your fault, Summer. Kung iniisip mo na kasalanan mo ang nangyari then think again.” For once, I believed it. I believe in my father. That nothing was my fault. It was like hearing Lawrence’s words again. It was just that this time, with my father, I was sure that it wasn’t my fault.

“I got three shots. And Tyler probably got more than me. At nararamdaman ko sa akin ang sakit. It must be terribly painful for him, too,” wika ko. I couldn’t hinder my thoughts. I was talking to my father, baring my soul and even if it wasn’t normal for our relationship, I realized that it felt good. That it was sacred. This was my father, and I was free to talk to him.

“His pain ended, wherever he is. I believed that he is a good kid,” aniya.

And I realized that, yes, Tyler was a good kid. Even my father who hadn’t met him think so. “Wherever he is, he must be with her,” sagot ko. Dad gave me a questioning look and I answered. “His mom.” He understood. As expected from him, he could easily understand things.

“Marami akong gustong itanong subalit alam kong hindi ito ang tamang panahon,” wika niya. I agreed. Ni hindi ko alam kung paano ko sasagutin ang anumang katanungan niya.

“About Arturia…” Hindi ko alam ang idadagdag ko sa sinimulan kong paksa.

Saglit na nag-isip si Daddy. “I thought sending you to Montello High was a perfect decision. That your personality would fit in there. And you’ll improve and find some new friends. Maybe, I got it all wrong considering

you ended up like this. It was my fault in the first place. I'm sorry, Summer," malungkot na wika ni Daddy.

"No, Dad. You were always right. I hate it but you always knew what was best for me. I was just hard-headed and hate being controlled. Montello High is a good school," sagot ko. Tumangu-tango si Daddy.

"So, you wanna stay?" Tanong niya.

"I… I want to… I wanna go to Arturia. Just like what you've decided yesterday. It was a family decision and I guess it's time for me to obey since my disobedience led me in this current situation," wika ko.

Dad patted my head. "Summer, kailangan mong maintindihan na hindi lang ito desisyon namin. It should also be your decision." I rolled my eyes. He should have told me that a long time ago.

"I can't decide for myself right now so please decide for me, Daddy."

"Alright. But remember that you can still change it." Gusto kong tumalon dahil sa ibinibigay sa aking big time choice ni Daddy.

"Wow, Dad. You're trusting me now. I feel so pressured," subok kong biro. Isang lame at walang humor na biro.

"After everything you've gone through… Lawrence's death, kidnapping and now… How can I not trust you?" Right. And his list was just a short one. He didn't know how long the list goes.

THREE days in the hospital. Three long, painful days of boredom. Iminungkahi ng doctor ang pananatili ko ng ilang pang araw subalit nagpumilit na akong umalis. Isa pa, they were not serving pizza.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tanong ni Daddy sa driver's seat.

"Dad, alam kong maraming bagay na ang naisantabi mo dahil sa akin. Business, and teaching at the university. I'm sure that your students are already missing their professor. And I'm also sure that you don't have to do what I want to do," matigas ang ulong wika ko. But the thing was, I was

thankful that he cancelled everything to look after me. He cancelled everything just to drive me to Montello High. If I have a hero, it was my dad, first and foremost. Mahirap din naman kasing magtungo sa Montello lalo na't may saklay ako at bandage pa sa kaliwang balikat.

"Daddy…" Sumeryoso ako.

"Hmmm?" Sagot niya.

"Why did you choose Montello High for me?" Tanong ko. Hindi ko inaakalang mag-uusap kami ng seryoso ni Daddy tungkol dito. I hated his every decisions for me without even asking why. Now, I guess it was a good time to make sense.

"Bakit mo naitanong kung kelan aalis ka na?" Balik-tanong niya.

"It lacks a good reputation compared to Arturia. It's a prestigious, wealthy school, yes, pero hindi rin maipagkakaila na tapunan iyon ng mga estudyanteng threat sa kaayusan ng isang normal na school. Iniisip ko kung itinapon mo ba ako doon dahil hindi ako bagay sa Arturia…"

"Una… hindi ako nagtatapon ng anak at hindi ka patapon. Pangalawa, ipinasok kita sa Montello High dahil ikaw si Summer Leondale. I was thinking that your character will be pretty handled in there. I was expecting that you will learn a lot of things and you will experience many changes."

I gritted my teeth. I was so stupid. It was all for me, then. And yeah, I did learn. My character and attitude were pretty handled in that place. I made friends. And saw death again… So I was stronger. At least, I hope I am.

"Pangatlo?" Tahimik kong tanong.

Hindi agad sumagot si Daddy. Diretso lang ang tingin niya sa natatanaw na naming Montello High.

"I spent my freshman year in high school here," bigla niyang sabi nang makapasok kami sa gate. What?! He spent a year here?

"Why are you saying this only now?" Malakas ang boses kong wika.

“Hey, young lady. Don’t raise your voice on me. I’m still your father,” babala niya. I just frowned on him. Bakit ngayon niya lang sinabi? “You didn’t ask. You were busy thinking that I threw you into a bad, delinquent school,” wika niya pa na tila nabasa ang katanungan sa isip ko. Hininto niya ang kotse sa tapat ng main building. Gusto ko pa siyang tanungin subalit may bagay kaming dapat asikasuhin.

“Let’s get this over with,” wika niya at saka umibis ng sasakyan. He would talk to Principal Steins and the faculty para asikasuhin ang pagta-transfer ko sa Arturia. Well, unang pasok ko pa lang naman dito, sinabi kong hindi ako magtatagal. At least, hindi ako nakick-out.

Mula sa kotse ay pinagmasdan ko ang school ground, ang dormitories… cafeteria… nightwoods. Mangilan-ngilan lang ang mga estudyante sa labas. Mukhang nasa kani-kanilang mga klase. Huminga ako ng malalim. May mga bagay na mas mabuting iwan at kalimutan dahil hindi mo na kayang dalhin. The gangsters, that bossy kidnapped-survivor, the rich chic, the other bitches, Black Government, Dark Monarch, the fake boyfriend, the devil… and the mafia reaper.

I should forget them all. But how can I forget them if they belong to the memories I should treasure? So maybe I should not. I would just leave but I would still keep everything whether they were nice or painful. Dahil kung kakalimutan ko ang lahat, mababalewala lahat ng naranasan ko. Mawawala lahat ng natutunan ko. Babalik lang ako muli sa simula.

Isang hampas ng kamay ang nagpabalik sa akin sa kasalukuyan. I saw the serious faces of Jamie and Mirden. Apparently, it was Jamie who almost break the car window. Binuksan ko ang pinto at pinilit kong lumabas kahit walang gamit na saklay. Humawak lang ako sa kotse at tumayo nang normal kahit nararamdaman ko ang pagkirot ng kaliwang binti ko.

“So you feel fine now,” seryosong wika ni Jamie. Tumango ako. What’s with these solemn girls?

“Tyler is gone,” wika muli ni Jamie na halatang pinipigilan lang ang lumuha.

“I was the first one to know,” walang emosyon kong sabi.

“He protected you, right? Because he got a damn crush on you,” wika ni Mirden and her tears flowed down her cheeks. I wanted to cry with her. I wanted to share a bed with them and tell each other how we were going to miss that freshman kid. But I couldn’t. And I was so tired of crying.

“What do you want to point out?” Seryoso ko muling tanong.

Jamie looked up as if to pull the tears back. “They were right. Ever since you came to Montello, hindi na normal ang lahat. Mas nakakatakot na ang mga nangyari. At nawalan tayo ng kaibigan. Muntik na ring mamatay si Mirden. Si Tyler… he was so young! He’s a damned kid! What the f ck!” Hindi ko inaasahan ang ganung mga salita mula kay Jamie. She must be really outraged.

“It was my fault, I know-” I started.

“That’s not our point!” Pagtataas niya ng boses habang tuluyan na ring kumawala ang mga luhang pinipigil niya. Mirden was already badly crying. “What we were trying to say here is why do you have to leave us in this situation?! Wala na si Tyler! Ni hindi kami pinahintulutang makita siya sa huling pagkakataon. Sobra kaming nasaktan! He was like a little brother! Tapos ngayon, ito naman! Aalis ka?!” Hysterical na wika ni Jamie.

“Nakasalubong namin si Mr. Leondale. At sinabi niyang aayusin niya ang paglipat mo ng school. T-totoo ba iyon, Summer?” Umiiyak na tanong ni Mirden.

Huminga ako ng malalim. Crap! My chest was aching from trying to control my emotions. “I told you, I’m a school hopper. Inaasahan ko nang hindi ako mananatili rito…”

“So, you’re really leaving us?” Tanong muli ni Mirden.

What can I say? I couldn’t just lie to them. “Yes,” tahimik kong sagot.

Nagulat ako nang itulak ako ni Jamie dahilan upang ma-out of balance ako. I fell to the ground. I could feel the pain starting to creep from my wounds. It was like being renewed again. Pero hindi ako nagsalita o kahit kumilos. Nakaupo lang ako sa lupa at nakatungo habang kinakagat ko ang labi ko.

“What? Hindi ka lalaban? Huh?! Di ba dito ko magaling?!” Narinig kong amok ng umiiyak na si Jamie habang pinipigilan siya ni Mirden.

“Ah! I knew it! We are weak people kaya wala kaming kwenta para pag-aksayahan mo ng lakas mo! Pasensya na, ha?! Hindi talaga kasi kami kasinglakas mo!” Sumisigaw na dagdag ni Jamie. Hindi pa rin ako sumagot. I was already defeated. And it hurt so bad that I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even fight. Not them. “Hindi mo kasi alam ang pakiramdam ng nawawalan ng kaibigan! You are a selfish, insensitive bitch!” Dagdag ni Jamie.

“Jamie! Stop it!” It was Mirden. These girls. How did I involved myself with them like this?

“Summer, kahit kailan ba itinuring mo man lang kaming kaibigan mo?” Tahimik na tanong ni Mirden. Mapait akong ngumiti at tumingin sa kanila.

“Kaibigan? I’m strong. Nahihibang na ba kayo? Ano’ng gagawin ko sa kaibigan na isang nerd at isang mahilig lang mamili ng damit?” They looked at me with shocked eyes. They have to hate me. This was the only way to make leaving easier. This was the easiest way to let go of each other and severe our ties. Even if it was terrible and painful.

Napalingon kami sa tumikhim. Tila kinukuha nito ang atensiyon namin.

“I’m sorry for breaking in, girls. But I have to take my young girl with horrible attitude out of the ground,” wika ni Daddy habang palapit sa akin at saka inalalayan akong makatayo. I winced at the sudden surge of a terrible pain. Ipinasok niya ako sa kotse at saka kami umalis ng paaralan. Nang malayo na kami ay muli akong nagsalita.

“Dad, it hurts. Everything in me is hurting… Can I cry beside you?” Tanong ko.

He smiled. “Of course,” sagot niya at saka ko pinakawalan ang mga luhang hindi ko alam kung saan nanggagaling. It was so damn painful.

“Can you keep this a secret?” Tanong ko sa pagitan ng pag-iyak.

“I couldn’t be your Dad if I couldn’t even keep this little secret of yours,” wika niya at nagpatuloy ako sa pag-iyak.

Tyler… How can everything be fine?

[30] Chapter 30: Moving Target

A/N: This is so calm. And the soundtrack for this Chapter is ‘Six Degrees of Separation’ by The Script. I love this song and, cause she’s only doing this out of desperation. ;)

Chapter 30: Moving Target

I was recovering fast. Sino bang niloloko ko? Nararamdaman ko pa rin ang epekto ng mga nangyari. At ang tangi ko lang ginawa ay umiyak. Kelan pa ako naging iyakin? Talaga naman! At ang nakaka-frustrate pa ay tila mas kumportable akong umiyak sa harap ni Daddy. Now, I looked like a freaking Daddy’s girl.

My wounds were apparently healing faster aside from the wound on my right shoulder. Heto ang bahaging hindi nagawang protektahan ni Tyler. That Kid! That stupid, damn kid! Paano niya nagawa sa akin ito? Now that I had come to think of everything that happened, para akong pinapatay ng guilt. I was trying my best not to be defeated by it. I made a promise to Lawrence that I’ll be stronger.

Subalit kahit gaano pa ako kalakas, sumasagi pa rin sa isip ko kung kasalanan ko ba talaga ang nangyari kay Tyler? He was a Mafia Reaper. He would be able to defend himself. He was the one who killed my previous assassins, right? He should have been able to defeat them. If.. If I didn’t follow him. If I wasn’t stupid enough to come after him to the Nightwoods… then he probably should have been still alive.

“A penny for your thoughts?” Naputol ang pag-iisip ko at saka nilingon ang may-ari ng boses. I was just at the veranda staring at nowhere. Hindi ko sinagot si Autumn. Sa halip ay itinuon ko ang paningin sa kung saan. I was away from this house for a long time and I was not sure if that long time would have been enough for me to miss it or to not feel anything at all.

“I was wondering how you are feeling right now. The pain, the trauma, and the loss. And then I realized that I can’t even imagine it,” wikang muli ni Autumn at saka tumayo sa tabi ko. I was imagining ourselves as two little puppies at the veranda. Bad imagination, though.

“It happened again. Someone died because of me. Another death in front of me,” walang emosyon kong sagot.

“It was never your fault, Summer,” wika niya at tinapik ako sa balikat.

I turned to her direction. She was so calm and beautiful and it made me wonder if she was also looking at the “nowhere” of mine. “Sinasabi ko rin iyan sa sarili ko. Hindi mo alam kung ilang beses ko iyang ipinaulit-ulit sa utak ko. That kid! He told me everything will be fine! Tell me, Autumn? How will things ever be fine?” I fought back my tears. As much as possible, gusto ko pa ring ipakita na may tatag pa rin ako. Na hindi ako lubusang ginuho ng mga pangyayari.

“That little kid. Iyan ba ang sinabi niya sa’yo?” Tanong niya. Tumingala ako para pigilin ang nagbabanta kong mga luha. Tumango ako sa kaniya.

“He protected me until his last breath. Kahit halos sumuko na ang katawan niya sa mga tama ng bala ng baril. Kahit may humahalik na sa buto niyang talim ng katana, tumayo pa rin siya upang itago ako sa likuran niya. Hindi ko iyon hiningi sa kaniya. Hindi ko hiningi sa kahit kanino man na mamatay para sa akin.” Matapos kong sabihin iyon ay kusa nang humulagpos ang nag-uunahan kong mga luha. Biglang nagflashback ang araw na kasama ko si Tyler.

“What good did I do to him to give his life on protecting me? I’m a certified bitch! I ruined his first dance. I harassed him by the school’s hallway! Why

the hell did he sacrificed his life for me?!!!" I was being hysterical so Autumn tried to calm me by tapping my shoulder and caressing my back.

"If you didn't say thank you then I guess everything was wasted and for nothing," malungkot niyang sabi.

"I… I… I did," humihikbi kong sagot. She smiled.

"Then everything will be fine," wika niya na ikinanuot ng noo ko. Why was everyone telling me that same statement?

"Autumn, I… I don't deserve it. I—"

"Summer, listen. You said that on Tyler's last breath, sinabi niyang 'Everything will be fine.' He was so brave to leave such an assurance. For the last time, he believed in you and assured you that everything will be fine. Bakit hindi mo siya paniwalaan? Just trust him. Kahit ngayon lang, turuan mong magtiwala ang sarili mo."

I stared at her with tearful eyes. Mukhang ginagamit niya ang pagiging nakatatandang kapatid upang makinig ako. And I did hear her.

"What if everything will never be fine? Wala kang ideya kung ano ang nangyayari. It's so chaotic! Dangerous! And deadly. It's like a damn labyrinth and I don't know how to get out," protesta ko habang pinapahid ang luha.

"Don't ever doubt, Summer," nakangiti niyang sagot. Malungkot kong ibinalik ang tingin sa kawalan.

"I've been a bad sister to you. Paano mo nagagawang maging mabuti sa akin?" Tanong ko.

"Because we are sisters. Kahit sino ka pa, kahit ano'ng mangyari, nandito lang ako," she said. Yes, that relationship in blood. Now, I was wondering how those two devils were coping up. Tyler was their youngest brother. He was their own blood that was wasted on the Nightwood's ground. I bet they

were going insane and were on a killing spree. I was sure they think that it was my fault. Of course, they hate me!

“It will be your first day in Arturia tomorrow,” biglang pagbubukas ni Autumn. Maybe I won’t cross path with those people again. “Aren’t you gonna miss your boyfriend?” Dagdag na tanong niya nang hindi ako sumagot.

“Matagal ko nang gustong pumasok sa Arturia but Dad sent me to Montello High instead,” wika ko na hindi pinansin ang tungkol sa boyfriend. Jin Cast. What is my fake boyfriend thinking right now? Did he also hate me because I wasn’t able to give him a fake break-up? But I had to leave. I had to… Right?

“Because Arturia is boring and he thought you wouldn’t fit in there. Sa totoo lang, medyo nakakainggit ka. Because Dad thought you are extraordinary. While I’m just so plain. Dad is so sure of my bright future while he seems challenged and curious on how colorful yours would be. He was so stunned because you were the only one who can stand against him. Hindi mo alam kung paano mo siya napapa-isip ng malalim kapag hindi niya inaasahan ang ginagawa mo…”

Hindi ako makapagsalita sa sinabi ni Autumn. Si Daddy… ganun ba ako sa paningin niya? I thought I was just a hard-headed and uncontrolled kid who gives my family lots of trouble.

“Bakit mo sinasabi ang mga bagay na iyan sa akin?” Tangi kong tanong. Hindi ko alam kung paano ako mag-re-react.

“To tell you that you’ve been wrong on hating our father. To tell you that everything he did was for you,” sagot niya. She looked at me with warm smile. Hindi ba’t sinabi niya na naiinggit siya sa akin? Pero ganito pa rin ang reaksiyon niya. She was envious of me and yet she was still smiling and so kind towards me.

“Autumn, if you really envy me, then why don’t you curse me? Slap me? Hurt me?” Tanong ko. Tumawa siya sa tinuran ko. Sometimes, I can’t understand her.

“Because I’m not you. And I agree with Dad. I’m so plain…” wika niya. I bet she was not waiting for me to tell her that she’s not plain. Because I won’t do that. She was wrong though. She doesn’t look plain to me. She was perfect. Naputol ang pag-uusap namin nang pareho naming matanaw ang paparating na pulang vintage Mustang.

“That damn car looks familiar,” mahina kong sabi kasabay ng pagpapahid ng luha.

“Awesome car. I think I’d trade mine for that,” komento ni Autumn.

“I don’t think so. I guess Sherlock Homes is paying us a visit,” sagot ko. Tiningnan lang ako ni Autumn. Halatang wala siyang ideya.

Huminto ang sasakyan sa harap ng bahay namin. Walang nagtangkang bumaba sa amin upang salubungin ang dumating na panauhin. Presko at buong tiwala sa sarili na bumaba ang taong lulan ng sasakyan. Uh, that self absorbed detective on his coat English hat.

“Sexiest detective alive,” biro ni Autumn. God! She sounded like Mirden! Ano’ng nakikita nila sa Senior Citizen na ito?

Tumingala sa direksyon namin ang Detective. “Good morning, ladies. You both look as beautiful as Juliet. But I’m no Romeo. So sa tingin ko, hindi na natin kailangang isang-alang alang ang hidwaan sa pagitan ng mga Montague at Capulet. Naparito ako upang-”

“What do you want?” Putol ko sa ano pa mang sasabihin niya. Masyado siyang maraming sinasabi. Mukha namang inaasahan na ni Autumn ang reaksyon ko kung kaya’t ngumiti na lang siya. Mukhang nawasak ko kung ano mang klasikong postura ni Detective Penber kaya sumeryoso siya.

“Kailangan nating mag-usap, Miss Leondale,” sagot niya.

“Naibigay ko na ang statement ko sa mga pulis. Wala tayong dapat pag-usapan!” Malakas kong wika upang umabot nang malinaw sa kaniyang pandinig.

“Sa tingin mo ba, alam ng mga pulis ang totoong nangyari?” Tanong niya. Hindi ako sumagot. “It’s for that kid. Can’t you be a little bit unselfish?” Muli niyang wika.

Hindi ako nagtangkang magsalita o kahit kumilos. Autumn, on the other hand, decided to leave the veranda. I saw her open the door and let the detective in. Iniwan ko na rin ang veranda at sinalubong si Detective Penber sa receiving room. Autumn instructed him to sit down at saka nagpaalam upang ipaghanda ng maiinom ang hindi imbitadong bisita. Why bother with hospitality?

“What now?” Diretsa kong tanong.

“How are you feeling, Summer?” I rolled my eyes at his question.

“Kung pumunta ka rito para makipagkumustahan-”

“Okay, Okay! Fine! Gusto ko lang magsimula sa normal na paraan. Why do you have to be so rude against a law officer?” Angal niya. Sumimangot lang ako sa kaniya at saka umupo sa sofa sa harapan niya. Wow. It had been such a long time since I felt the comfort of this couch.

Huminga siya ng malalim at saka nagpatuloy sa pagsasalita. “We’re both sorry for what happened to Tyler del Valle. He was brutally killed. Gusto kong sabihin na he was such a young, powerless kid subalit hindi iyon ang ipinapakita ng sarili kong imbestigasyon sa pangyayari.”

“You’re just sorry and I am doomed. I’ve seen the worst part of that crime. And Tyler defended us the best way he can. Pinrotektahan niya ako ng buhay niya. Kaya kung ano man ang deductions mo tungkol sa pagkatao ni Tyler, he’s only a young kid,” sagot ko. Knowing the abilities of Detective Penber, malamang ay alam na niya ang katauhan ni Tyler.

“Hindi mo nakukuha ang ibig kong sabihin, Summer. Marami na siyang pinatay na tao. At ang ideya ng mga taong kasama niyang namatay noong gabing iyon ay hindi mga ordinaryong tao. They were assassins who killed a lot of well-known names sa underground society.”

Kumunot ang noo ko. “Underground society,” ulit ko.

“There is an underground society operating under our knowledge,” sagot niya. I know. I’ve heard it all before. The mafia, gangsters, drug lords, corrupt politicians and of couse! It was all part of this so-called underground society.

“Why the hell are you telling me these things?” Tanong ko.

“On the underground society, Mafia Freniere is a big name. Illegal shipping of high-powered guns. International distribution and selling of illegal drugs, highly paid organization of assassination business, human trafficking, unlawfully acquired cars…” I cut him off.

“Please, Detective Penber. Stop with the orientation of darkness. Get to the point,” I insisted.

“The Frenieres are being targeted. Nung gabing iyon, hindi isang sarkastiko at aroganteng estudyante ang pakay ng mga assassin. They came for the Mafia Reaper,” deklara niya. The expression on my face was priceless. The shock that I felt was unfathomable. Ni hindi ako makahanap ng tamang salita na isasagot. Una, hindi ako ang target. Pangalawa, ako ba ang tinutukoy niyang sarkastiko at aroganteng estudyante?

“Iyon ba ang dahilan kung bakit mas siniguro nilang hindi mabubuhay si Tyler?” Mahina kong tanong.

“Apparently, yes. You’re just on the way,” sagot niya. “In short, naroon ka man o wala, mamamatay pa rin si Tyler del Valle nung gabing iyon dahil markado na siya.”

“They… They are freaking morons for killing Tyler!” Nagulat ako sa pagtaas ng boses ko. Nagagalit ako sa mga taong iyon. Matapos kong sisihin ang sarili ko, si Tyler pala talaga ang pakay nila! A kid! They ganged up and killed a kid!

Sumilay ang nakakainis na ngiti sa labi ni Detective Penber. “Well, well, if I were them, you’ll be my target. Because you look more dangerous to me

than that kid," wika niya.

Masamang tingin ang isinagot ko sa kaniya. This must also be the reason kung bakit buhay pa ako ngayon. Because I wasn't the target. Dahil kung ako, malamang hindi na nila ako iniwang buhay. At kung mabuhay man ako, I will be killed by the mafia because I cost them their reaper.

"I also came here to give you this," wika ni Detective Penber at inabot sa akin ang isang envelope. Kinuha ko iyon at saka binuksan. It was the diary that Tyler gave me. I pulled it out at inilapag sa center table. I thought that was all of it subalit meron pang ibang laman ang envelope. I grabbed the thing out. And there on my hand was a cold, tiny black gun. I used this that night and I had no idea what happened to these things nang mamatay si Tyler.

"The police took your jacket nang dalhin ka sa ospital. But I do a faster and more effective investigation so kinuha ko ang mga ito mula sa jacket. This gun, the bullet inside them are rare. Isang tao lang ang alam kong nagmamay-ari nito. But that person died roughly five years ago… I'm not sure," paliwanag niya.

May ideya ako sa tinutukoy niya subalit gusto ko pa ring makumpirma. "Sino ang taong iyon?" I asked.

"Catherine del Valle. A fierce and gorgeous cat. Freniere's mafia reaper noong nabubuhay pa siya."

This was too much information. She must be Tyler's mother, then. Subalit bakit ibinigay sa akinni Tyler ang baril na ito. Pinagmasdan ko ang armas. There was a Victorian pattern on it. Elegant and deadly. Ngayon ko lang ito napagmasdan nang mabuti. It was actually beautiful.

"She had been invincible. But she died protecting someone. Just like her son who died protecting you. That Tyler kid. Siya ang nag-iisang anak ng reaper na si Catherine," pahayag niya. I just stared at him blankly. Mukhang nakita niya sa ekspresyon ko na hindi ako nabigla sa sinabi niya. He cleared his throat.

“Mukhang alam mo na ang kalahati ng mga sinabi ko,” wika niya.

“Why are you telling me this information, Detective Penber?” Tanong ko.

“Well, I couldn’t ask Mirden Montgomery to investigate Montello High School so you’re obviously the next best person to work with.”

I knew it. This jerk was just using me for his investigation.

“Hindi na ako estudyante ng Montello High,” seryoso kong sagot.

“Alam ko. I already have another person to work with me inside the school. But it was only you who can do one more thing,” wika niya. Kunot-noo ko siyang tiningnan.

“What you’re doing is illegal!” Bulalas ko.

“I didn’t force anyone to work with me. They volunteered. At nag-volunteer ka rin dati. What I’m thinking about is the result. I’m determined to find the truth and I will get it in whatever way that works,” sagot niya. He got a point. I did volunteer back then. Granted, ginawa namin ito noon para iligtas si Mirden but I’ve learned my lesson. At akala ko ba ay malalim ang moral qualms nitong si Penber? Apparently, kapag nasubukan na niya ay uulitin pala niya basta makakalusot siya.

“I’m not into it anymore,” matigas kong wika.

He suddenly grabbed the gun from my hand and the diary.

“Hey!” Angal ko.

“These are already police properties,” wika niya.

“You blackmailing, kangaroo bastard!” Galit kong sigaw. I have nothing against kangaroos. They’re actually cute. Ewan ko kung bakit napasama iyon sa inis ko.

“I’m really sorry, Miss Leondale,” mahinahon niyang sagot.

“What’s that freaking thing that only I can do?” Inis kong tanong.

“There is a funeral inside the Freniere Mansion. I don’t know how they do these things but I want you to walk in there and tell Van Freniere to talk to me,” walang pag-aalinlangan niyang sagot. Hindi makapaniwalang tumitig ako sa kaniya habang pino-proseso ng utak ko ang nais niyang ipagawa sa akin. He waited for my answer at sinalubong rin ang tingin ko.

“Plano mo ba talagang mawala ako sa mundo?” Seryoso kong tanong.

Ngumiti siya at saka sumagot, “Of course not. I’m the hero of my every story. I would never want to be a villain. Subalit katulad ng sinabi ko, ikaw lang ang makakagawa ng bagay na ito.”

“But I’m scared. I’ve been in a trauma and I almost died-”

“Literally, you didn’t almost died. Naroon ka man o wala, si Tyler ang pakay nila. You’ve been into deadly situations. Naisip ko nga nab aka may koneksyon ka kay kamatayan kaya ayaw ka pa nyang husgahan,” wika niya.

“Oh, please. Stop with all your pointless reasoning! Kahit saang korte ay hindi tatanggapin ang rason na yan kapag dinemanda kita!” Galit kong sabi.

“Hindi na natin kailangang umabot sa korte. Ang kailangan mo lang gawin ay magdesisyon,” sagot ni Detective Penber. Galit na tinapunan ko siya ng masamang tingin. What’s with this walking jerk! He’s putting me in a trapped situation again where saying ‘No’ seems to be so wrong!

“So what’s your decision?” Tanong ni Detective Penber. Naisip kong gusto ko muling makita ang mukha ni Tyler. Kung talagang may funeral for him then I’d probably see his body there… unless it’s cremated. But is it gonna be worth it if I’ll take the risk? Kung meron ngang funeral si Tyler, paano ko siya malalapitan nang hindi ibinubuwis ang buhay ko? Malamang na malaking hanay ng mga miyembro ng mafia ang nakapaligid sa kanya.

And then there was this thing about the devil. Paano ko siya haharapin? Well, siya naman talaga ang magiging purpose ng pagpunta ko sa Freniere mansion. Honestly, gusto ko rin siyang makita… Gusto ko siyang

makausap. But what the hell am I gonna tell him? Nothing will ever change. And I don’t think telling him the details of how Tyler died will make everything better. Hindi nga ba’t nagdesisyon na ako na iwan ang lahat? Hindi ba’t gusto ko nang magsimulang muli? That’s the definition of Arturia. A new beginning. Normal but would never hurt.

“Tinitingnan ko pa lang ang mukha mo, parang nagkakaroon na ng modern cold war sa utak mo.” Tinag sa akin ng Detective.

“Cause you’re making me do this! Such an old man full of shit!” Inis kong sagot. Saglit na kumunot ang noo niya sa sinabi ko subalit agad ring bumalik sa dati ang ekspresyon niya.

“When you’re in doubt, you should do this,” wika niya sabay abot ng isang coin.

“What? I need a hundred thousand of that if you’re gonna buy my decision,“sarkastiko kong sabi.

Umiling si Detective Penber. If there’s a man full of patience, it’s him. “You can toss the coin, Summer. If it’s head then it’s Freniere Mansion and if it’s tail then it’s your candies and chocolates.” Tinitigan ko ng ilang segundo ang coin at saka kinuha. I hope this poor little thing can help me decide. I threw it in the air and it really did help me decide.

Tinitigan ko lang ito habang nasa ere at saka ako tumayo bago pa man ito bumagsak. The detective caught the coin quickly but I said, “Let’s Go!”

Tumayo na rin siya. “This will be the last time that you’re gonna boss me around like this! If I make it out alive, you better give me that police property!” Dagdag ko. He just smiled at me. That smile full of wits. Irritating.

Nakita kong papalapit si Autumn na may dalang baso ng fresh juices and hot pancakes.

“Where are you going?” Tanong niya.

“We’ll buy some-pancakes,” walang emosyon kong sagot at saka dumiretso sa front door.

“I’m gonna leave now, sweet lady. Goodbye, my Juliet,” narinig kong pamamaalam ni Detective Penber. I just rolled my eyes and walked towards the vintage Mustang. What’s with that freaking coin!

[31] Chapter 31: When Blood Turns to Poison

Author’s Note:

I am so freaking thankful to Editor MUB who’d been my pain absorber for the last few days. I’ve been bugging her with my shoulder pain and wonderings. She said that I’m actually stressing her out!

And to this Kakarot freak who hasn’t given me my SANJI figure yet. I’ve been waiting for like, uh, forever and yet SANJI is still not on my hands! He’s such a bully! Haha. And yeah, I bet many of you got this Junior-Senior prom. So how was it? I told my brother to dance like it’s the closest thing to fairytale. I hope he had a chance to dance with a wonderful girl. Well, I bet all girls deserve to be called wonderful and pretty, right?

And yeah, Happy Birthday to my Mom and my Li’l sister! And also the readers who are actually February babies!

Ed Sheeran’s Give Me Love is the soundtrack for this chapter. That’s it! That’s it! It’s getting too long so I’ll shut up now!

Chapter 30: When Blood Turns to Poison

I can almost see it. I can almost see the end. I can almost touch my death. Well, probably not. I was just seeing the enormous outline of the Freniere Mansion from this distance. The only good thing in this situation was that I was driving the Mustang of Detective Penber, top down. That was the sucker plan: I have to go to the Monster’s Dungeon alone. Maybe I need someone to hit my head and knock some sense in me. Why the hell did I let that jerk manipulate me? Uh, of course. Dahil sa mga mahahalagang rason. Kailangan kong makita ang baril at diary notebook na ibinigay ni Tyler.

Hindi ko alam pero hindi ko kayang makitang manatili ang mga iyon sa kamay ng otoridad. Tyler gave those precious things to me. Kaya ang ibig sabihin ay pag-aari ko na ang mga bagay na iyon. At kailangang maibalik sa akin ang mga iyon. Tsk! That freaking detective! He always get his way!

Inis na hinampas ko ang manibela. Kung hindi ko lang nakikita ang pangangailangan ko sa sasakyang ito ay baka napagdiskitahan ko na ito. If I ever had a partner on my deadly missions, then probably it was this car. I think I like this Mustang more than the owner. Sana naging sasakyan na lang si Detective Penber at naging tao na lang ang sasakyang ito.

Unti-unting nagiging madalang na ang kabahayan at malalaking puno na lang ang nasa paligid ng kalsada. Tila tumatayo ang balahibo ko habang papalapit ako sa teritoryo ng mga Freniere. There was really something creepy with that place. Walang signs na nagsasabing ang lupang tatapakan ko ay pag-aari ng mga Freniere. Malalaman mo lang iyong kapag tila nagbago na ang paligid, mas dumilim ang mga anino ng malalaking puno at mas lumalamig ang hangin kaysa sa normal. And finally, it did. Mabuti na lang at medyo naaalala ko pa ang nakapangingilabot na daan na ito simula nang dalhin ako rito ng taong iyon. Hindi ko alam kung ipagpapasalamat ko na walang kahit anong palikong kalsada at diretso lang sa hanggangana. At ang hangganang tinutukoy ko ay ang malaking gate ng Freniere mansion. It was like a road way to hell. There was no turning back.

Habang papalapit ako at nilalamon ng luar ay mas nabubuhay ang pinipigilan kong kaba sa dibdib ko. Patang gusto ko nang patakbuhin paatras ang sasakyan. But well, the road says no turning back. So I continued driving on that creepy road surrounded by giant trees. Napansin ko ang isang malaking lalaki sa tabi ng kalsada. He was not wearing a mask nor a tuxedo. He was just shirtless and muscled-in a creepy way. May dala siyang isang napakalaking machine gun na tila hindi kayang buhatin ng isang normal na tao. Walang hirap niya iyong inangat nang papalapit ang sasakyan ko at saka itinutok sa akin. Awtomatiko akong napapreno at halos masubsob ang mukha ko sa manibela dahil sa biglaang pagtigil ng sasakyan. Nakita kong papalapit siya. Isinisigaw ng utak ko na paandarin muli ang sasakyan subalit tila naparalisa ang buo kong katawan. Of course,

this would be my end. Maybe I was really a cat and I just lost all the nine lives.

Patuloy sa paglapit ang lalaki. Isa siyang halimaw na walang maskara. Nanginginig ang buo kong katawan habang tinatantiya ko kung ilang hakbang na lang siya. Napapitlag ako ng marahas niyang buksan ang pinto ng driver's seat. Bakit ba kasi naisipan ko pang i-top down ang kotseng 'to!

"Gusto mo bang pihitin ko ang sasakyan na ito sa kabilang direksyon para makaalis ka?" Kahit ang boses niya ay buong-buo at nakakapag dulot ng takot sa sinumang kausapin niya. Too bad, ako ang kinakausap niya. Atubiling nilingon ko siya pero hindi ako nakapagsalita. Napatitig lang ako sa mukha niya. He was a man with dark skin, and must be on his mid-thirties. At sa ganito kalapit na distansya ay nakikita kong napakaraming peklat sa mukha niya. But what really got me was a deep scar on his forehead. He was definitely dangerous, like a heartless hunter. But I also saw something in his dark eyes. Was that grief? I wasn't so sure.

Napabalik ako sa kasalukuyan nang malakas niyang isinara ang pinto. Pinanuod ko siya nang pumunta siya sa unahan ng kotse at gamit ang isang kamay ang iniangat niya ang hood at inikot ang kotse sa kabilang direksyon. What the freaking hell?! Did he just lift the car using only one hand? Matapos iyon ay dumiretso siya sa paglalakad patungo sa hangganan. Hindi makapaniwalang tiningnan ko lang ang daan pabalik sa pinanggalingan ko. The safest way to the safer place, far from the monster's dungeon. This monster face was giving me a chance to run away. But I have already decided to accept this mission. Hindi ako ang tipo ng taong aatras nang hindi pa nasusubukan. I started the engine and made a drift, harsh on the tires, imperfect and definitely unlawful U-turn. Mabuti na lang at walang traffic enforcers dito. This was the reason why my parents never gave me a car.

Binilisan ko ang pagpapatakbo upang malampasan ko ang kung anumang nilalang na bumuhat ng Mustang kanina. But he was prepared for me. Humarang siya sa kalsada at sinalubong niya ng dalawang kamay ang paparating na sasakyan. Napaatras siya ng ilang hakbang subalit nagawa niya pa ring pigilan ang vintage na kotse. Hirap na umangil ang makina ng

sasakyan hanggang sa tuluyan ko na itong itinigil. Sh t! What exactly was this creature?!

Galit na hinampas niya ang unahan ng Mustang. It almost made a dent! Tapos ay naglakad siya patungo sa driver's seat I stared at him. Kung hahampasin niya ako ng machine gun, then I would definitely die or end up comatose in a hospital. At bakit di ko naisip na itaas ang bubong ng kotse kanina?! Uh, I don't really like hospitals.

"Kahit gaano pa katigas ang ulo mong bata ka, mas makabubuti kung susunod ka sa sinasabi ko. Umuwi ka na sa inyo!" Sigaw niya sa akin. I should be scared to death, crippled by the corner and faint. But well, I just continued staring at him. Habang dinadagdagan niya ang sinasabi niya, unti-unti ring nababawasan ang takot ko.

"Nakikinig ka ba?" Muli niyang tanong. Huminga ako ng malalim.

"Tama ang direksyong tinatahak ko at hindi mo ako pwedeng pigilan," may nginig sa boses na sagot ko. It was better than before. Kanina kasi ay ni hindi ko magawang magsalita.

Matiim niyang pinagmasdan ang mukha ko at seryoso kong sinalubong ang tingin niya. I had this feeling that he wouldn't hurt me. Or maybe not. I could really be provoking sometimes.

"Alam mo ba kung ano ang dulo ng kalsadang ito? Katapusan. Katapusan lang ang maaari mong kahantungan. Masyado ka pang bata para mamatay kaya kung ako sa'yo, iiwan ko na ang lugar na ito."

I looked intently into his eyes. There was really something in it. And it was something I couldn't figure out. "I will go to the Freniere mansion. Hindi ba't ito ang daan papunta roon?" Seryoso kong sagot. Natigilan ang nilalang sa kaniyang narinig. Tila hindi siya makapaniwala na binanggit ko ang Freniere Mansion. Of course, this monster-faced creature must be a part of the Freniere mafia.

"Alam mo ba ang lumalabas sa bibig mo, binibini? Binanggit mo ba ang 'Freniere Mansion'?" Nakakunot-noong tanong niya.

“Of course. I’ve been there. I slept in one of those big rooms in there. I had dinner in there like one good, summer vacation,” sagot ko. Hindi rin siya makapaniwala.

Umiling-iling siya at saka nagtanong muli. “At bakit gusto mo pang bumalik doon kung nakaalis ka na pala ng buhay doon dati?”

I looked straight into his eyes. I guess my next words would be reflect on those dark orbs. “For a friend’s funeral,” seryoso kong sabi.

This time, hindi kaagad siya sumagot. He just stared at me. Nakita at nakumpirma ko rin kung ano ang nakatago sa kaniyang mga mata. Lungkot. Isa siyang nalulungkot na halimaw. Gusto kong literal na umiling sa naisip ko. Paano ba magiging malungkot ang isang halimaw? O maaring mali ako sa isang bagay. Maaaring hindi talaga siya halimaw. I should learn not to judge people’s character with their faces. The Frenieres were enchantingly good-looking creatures and yet, they were absolutely monstrous. And this man definitely looked creepy and yet, he didn’t even try to choke my neck. He even tried to give me a chance to run away from hell.

“Kilala mo ba ang batang iyon?” Sa wakas ay tanong niya. Malamang ang mafia reaper ang tinutukoy niya. Nagiging malinaw na rin ang emosyon niya.

“Kaibigan ko si Tyler del Valle. Alam ko ang mga bagay tungkol sa kaniya. Magkasama kami nung gabing… pinatay siya.” Ibinaba ko ang suot kong cardigan at ipinakita ang may benda kong sugat sa balikat.

Tumangu-tango siya at saka ibinalik sa ayos ang suot kong cardigan. “Alam ko ang detalye ng pagkamatay ni Tyler. At ang detalye naman tungkol sa’yo ay hindi masyadong binanggit. Subalit tumatak iyon sa utak ko. Pinilit ka niyang protektahan,” seryoso niyang sagot. Hindi ako nagsalita. Kailangan ko munang kontrolin ang mga nagbabantang luha sa aking mga mata.

“Y-you cared for Tyler, right?” Sa wakas ay naisatinig ko.

“Walang paki-alam ang mafia kung kaibigan ka man ni Tyler o hindi. Maswerte ka at umabot ka pa sa ganitong parte ng lugar. At malamang na

kapag nakita ka ng dalawang iyon, papatayin ka nila kaagad. Siguradong sa panahong ito ay walang silang papakinggang rason," sagot niya.

"I will still take the risk. Hindi nagdalawang isip si Tyler nang iharang niya ang katawan niya upang protektahan ako nung gabing iyon. Gusto kong makita siya sa huling pagkakataon at hindi na magbabago ang isip ko," determinado at seryoso kong sagot. Nag-isip siya saglit bago muling nagsalita.

"Kung ganun, binibini, maaari ba akong makisabay sa iyong sasakyan?" Tanong niya.

Ngumiti ako at saka binuksan ang pinto sa may passenger seat. Umikot siya sa kotse at saka lumulan sa sasakyan. Pinaandar ko iyong muli at pinagpatuloy ang byahe patungong hangganan.

Tahimik lang ang nilalang sa tabi ko habang ako'y nagmamaneho. Tila mayroon siyang malalim na iniisip. Hindi ko na lang siya pinansin. Bumalik ako sa pag-iisip tungkol sa maaaring kahantungan ko sa misyong ito. Damn that detective! He was a freaking law officer and yet he's a great violator of human rights!

Nakita ko na ang mga naka-tuxedong lalaki na may mga armas at tila nagrereport ng mga nangyayari sa paligid sa maliit na mikropono sa kanilang kuwelyo. Subalit mukhang hindi ako ang mas yumanig ng kanilang atensyon kundi ang kasama ko. Now, I wonder who this man really was. He must be a V.I.P. for the Freniere Mafia.

Nang marating namin ang malaking gate ay dahan-dahan iyong bumukas. Nilingon ko ang nasa tabi ko at nakita ko ang malungkot niyang ekspresyon. Maybe he also came here for Tyler's funeral. My curiousity burned within me. Itinigil ko ang kotse sa circular driveway ng fountain. Parang mas naging dark at gloomy ang fairytale mansion sa harap ko. It was like a matured adaptation of a fairytale movie, dark and unrealistic. You would come to know that there was really no prince coming for you. You would understand how scary the witches, dragons and monsters were. You would see how thick the high walls could be. You would know that a

freaking kiss would not bring the dead back. You would see that bitches existed and you were not born a princess but a freaking pauper.

“Why the f ck are you with that girl?” Sabay kaming lumingon ng kasama ko sa entrance ng mansion. It was Sebastian Freniere. He was wearing a dark formal attire. He was still handsome but he looked tired and weary, frustrated… disappointed. Hindi ko alam kung paano ko siya ide-describe. In a blink of an eye, nakita ko na lang siya na nasa harapan ko na and we were staring eye to eye. I could sense his hatred very clearly.

“I told you before that I would kill you, right?” Mapait ang tinig niyang wika. Hindi ako nakasagot. This was real danger. I was scared to death now. “Well, it’s time.” Mahigpit niyang hinawakan ang leeg ko. He was choking me and I couldn’t breath. Hinawakan ko siya sa braso, trying to stop him but he was so strong and I reacted late. Is this the end for me? What a lame way to die!

Subalit isang malaking kamay ang humawak sa braso ni Tres. Mukhang nagulat din maski si Tres at lumingon sa nagmamay-ari ng braso. The monster-faced man who didn’t hurt me earlier was now protecting me.

“Sebastian. Dalhin mo ako sa kapatid mo.” Nagtiim ang bagang ni Tres at saka niya ako binitawan. I coughed for a few times and gasped for air. Sh t! Ilang beses ko bang kelangan mapalapit sa kamatayan?!

“Max, she killed the mafia reaper!” Galit na wika ni Tres.

Tinapik siya ni Max sa balikat at saka ako inalalayan sa braso. “Sebastian, alam mong walang kakayahan ang batang ito upang patayin ang mafia reaper. Wag mo siyang saktan. Kasama ko siya at gusto naming makita ang kapatid mo,” paliwanag ng tinatawag na ‘Max.’ Max. Mukhang inirerespeto siya ni Tres.

Matalim ang tinging ipinukol ni Tress a akin at saka nagpatiuna papasok ng mansion. Sabay kaming sumunod ni Max habang hawak niya ako sa braso. When we entered the mansion, the first thing that caught my eye was the rectangular wooden box with fresh flowers around it. I wanted to run towards the box, hoping that that person would smile back at me once

again. Subalit binitawan ako ni Max at nauna na siyang lumapitsa taong iyon.

Pinagmasdan ko si Max habang tahimik niyang kinakausap si Tyler. Nahugot ko ang aking paghinga nang napansin kong umiiyak siya. That scary, big man was crying for Tyler. Maliban sa aming tatlo ay wala nang ibang taong naroroon. If they would just let our friends from Montello High give their farewell to Tyler… Subalit alam kong imposible iyon. Ilang minutong nagtagal doon si Max at saka lumapit sa akin at tinapik ako sa balikat. Lumapit ako sa kinalalagyan ni Tyler. He was a cute, pale and lifeless kid in a formal attire. Ang dami kong gustong sabihin sa kaniya. Pero makikinig ba siya?

“Mukhang nag-iisa ka rito, ah,” tahimik kong sabi sa boses na kami lang ni Tyler ang nakakarinig. O ako lang ang nakakarinig. “Kung nasaan ka man ngayon, siguraduhin mong masaya ka.” Uh! How could I be so demanding to a dead person?

“I’m sorry for ruining your first dance… I’m so sorry for being so mean to you in the hallway… I’m so sorry, I couldn’t do anything to protect you that time…” I paused. I didn’t realize that I was already crying.

“But thank you. Thank you for protecting me. Gusto kong sabihin na I don’t deserve it pero malamang hindi ka sasang-ayon. Kasama mo na ba si Catherine del Valle? Kapag nakita mo si Lawrence, kwentuhan mo siya tungkol sa akin, ah.” What was up with these tears? Lapastangan! Hindi ko silang pahihintulutang malaglag.

“I saw Max cry for you. Did the other devils cry for you, too? Who knows? Ikaw lang siguro ang makakaalam niya. Tyler, I will never forget you… And I still believe in what you said, that everything’s gonna be fine,” pagtatapos ko. Matapos kong pahirin ang luha ko ay bumalik ako sa kinaroroonan ni Max. I felt so impolite addressing him just by his name. But well, that was his name. Probably, Old Max would do.

Nakarinig kami ng mga hakbang mula sa grand staircase. I held my breath at the scene. Algernon Freniere was leaping down from the stairs together with several men in suit. Tumango siya sa mga kasama niya nang makababa

sa engrandeng hagdan. Agad naman silang dumiretso sa labas ng mansion at ang tanging natira sa loob ay si Algernon Freniere, si Tres, si Max at ako. Now I wonder kung dapat ba akong sumunod sa labas. Algernon Freniere was d mn serious. Just serious. Wala na bang ibang emosyong mababasa sa kanya? What kind of funeral was this?

“Sir Algernon,” bati ni Old Max. My nickname for him still didn’t sound good.

“Max Brown,” sagot ni Algernon at saka tumingin sa direksyon ko. Hindi ko napigilan ang pagbilis ng tibok ng puso ko. “Muli tayong nagkita, Binibini. Alam kong tatahakin mo ang daan pabalik ditto, anu’t ano pa man,” wika niya na ikinagulo ng utak ko. Sinasabi ba niya na isa akong inaasahang panauhin?

“Sir Algernon, if you order to kill her now, I’ll gladly do it.” Matalim ang tingin sa aking wika ni Tres.

Hindi naman lumingon sa kaniya ang matandang Freniere. “Kamusta na ang iyong pakiramdam, hija?” Tanong niya sa akin. Hindi ako sigurado kung dapat ba akong sumagot ngunit sa huli ay pinili kong magsalita.

“Ma-maayos na po,” wika ko na may pilit na paggalang. I don’t know. But his aura demanded respect.

“Mabuti kung gayon,” aniya at saka bumaling kay Old Max. Bago pa muling magsalita si Algernon ay muling nagkomento si Tres.

“We can’t just leave her alive. She was the reason why we lost the mafia reaper-”

“Sebastian!” Mataas at dumagundong ang boses na putol ni Sir Algernon sa anupamang sasabihin ni Tres. “Kailangan ko pa bang ulitin sa iyo ang mga impormasyon upang lubos mong maintindihan?” Galit niyang tanong. Tila nawala ang dugo ko sa buong katawan. Next time na magalit mulit si Algernon Freniere, kailangang wala ako sa paligid. Nakakatakot. Nakakapangilabot.

“Max, bago tayo mag-usap, maaari bang siguraduhin mong makaalis ng ligtas ang batang ito?” Wika ni Sir Algernon. Agad namang sumang-ayon si Max at hinawakan ako sa braso.

“Sandali! Mayroon pa akong isang pakay ditto,” tutol ko. Nagtatakang tumingin sa akin si Old Max sa akin samantalang tila inaasahan naman ni Algernon Freniere ang sinabi ko.

Nagdadalawang isip pa ako kung sasabihin ko ba ang isa ko pang pakay. Naisip kong sumugal. “Maaari ko rin po bang makausap si Van?” Nakita ko ang pagkalitong rumehistro sa mukha ni Old Max. Hindi na napigilan ni Tres ang kaniyang sarili at humakbang papalapit sa amin.

“What else do you want, bitch? Akala mo ba ay mananatili si Van sa panig mo matapos ang lahat ng nangyari?! You are not really worth it!” Galit na galit na sigaw ni Tres.

Huminga ako ng malalim. “Wala akong magagawa kung yan ang takbo ng isip mo, Sebastian. But I came here to see Tyler and talk to Van. Not to listen to your pointless remarks, bastard!” Galit kong sagot kay Tres. He was dangerous and deadly but he was also getting to my nerves.

“Do you think Van will never kill you? Think again, Summer. To him, you are nothing but a damned, stupid prey waiting to be killed. Kung ako sa’yo ay magsisimula na akong magtago. Sinisiguro kong buburahin kita sa mundo kasama ang pamilya mo. And yeah, maybe I can taste a piece of your beautiful sister, too!” Nanlamig ang buong katawan ko sa sinabi niya. It that was only an empty threat or a fixed plan for the future, it really shook me off. Galit akong humakbang sa kaniya at itinulak siya. Hindi siya natinag. Balak sana niya akong gantihan subalit hinawakan siya sa balikat ni Old Max.

“Don’t you ever dare touch them, you monster!” Galit kong singhal.

Puno ng galit at kasamaan na ngumisi si Tres. “And I’m wondering how you would taste in my mouth, too.” Isang galaw ang nagpatahimik kay Tres. He fell to the ground with a thud. Nakita ko nang iangat ni Algernon

Freniere ang kanan niyang kamay at tila may hiniwa sa leeg ni Tres dahilan upang mawalan ng malay ang mas batang Freniere.

Hindi ko nagawang kumilos sa nasaksihan ko. It was actually violent considering na anak niya si Tres but wasn't this on my favor.

"I think my sons got their own concept of the word 'gentleman.' Hinihiling kong pagpasensyahan mo sila, binibini," kalmado at parang walang nangyaring wika ni Algernon Freniere.

"A-ahm… Gusto ko po sanang makausap si… si Van. Kung… ipapahintulot niyo po…" Hindi ko alam kung paano ko pa gagawing magalang ang pananalita ko. Tumango naman ang matandang Freniere.

"Hindi pa umuuwi si Giovanni. Ipagpaumanhin mong muli subalit maaari ka nang makaalis," kalmadong pagtataboy niya sa akin.

Maaaring wala nga siya rito dahil kung nandito siya sa mansion, malamang ay nagpakita na sya at pinagtangkaan na rin akong patayin gaya ni Tres. Iginaya ako ni Old Max paalis subalit bago pa man kami tuluyang makalabas ng mansion ay muling nagsalita si Algernon Freniere. "Hija, sana'y hindi na tayo muling magkita dahil hindi ko maipapangakong ligtas ka sa aking nagdidilim nang paningin. Paalam." Iyon lang at nawala na siya sa loob ng isang napakalaking mansion.

Kinilabutan ako sa tonong ginamit niya. Litera na tumayo ang balahibo ko. Nilalabanan ko na lang ang takot ko at saka nagtungo sa naghihintay na Mustang. Binuksan ko ang driver's seat at kasunod ang pag-upo ni Old Max sa passenger seat.

"Alam ko kung saan nagtatago si Giovanni," tangi niyang sabi. Pinaandar ko ang sasakyan. Tahimik akong sumunod sa direksyong tinutukoy niya subalit nagugulo na ang isip ko. Kailangan ko bang makita si Van? Kaya ko bang makita si Van? Noong gabing… noong gabi bago nangyari iyon sa amin ni Tyler, wala si Van. I remember thinking about how I feel whenever he was around and in actuality, I was scared. Right now, part of me wanted to run away from him. The other part wanted to see him.

This is a mission, Summer. Right. Kung iisipin ko na misyon nga lang ito, magagawa ko. I had to follow my guts. And my guts said that I could trust Old Max.

Halos ilang minuto bago kami huminto sa harap ng isang resto-bar. At mukhang hindi siya pangkaraniwang bar. Isa siyang inuman na tila haling ang mga bituka, criminal o masasamang tao ang mga parokyano. These men were with the guns, tattoos and who knows what else. A devil's haven. Would Van really go to a place like this?

"Are you sure na narito siya?" Tanong ko sa katabi ko.

"Gusto kong uminom habang hinahanap mo siya rito," sagot niya at saka umibis ng sasakyan. Dali-dali kong kinuha ang susi sa ignition at sumunod sa kaniya.

Everyone was looking at us when we entered. Well, everyone was looking at me like I was a fresh and delicious meat. Maituturing na yata akong isang anghel sa lugar na ito. Mayroong banda sa entablado na tumutugtog ng maayos na awitin. Hell, even the band members were like goons. But I couldn't say anything bad about their music. Uh, I freaking know how things end up with bad music.

Umupo sa pinakamalapit na mesa si Max habang nagpapatuloy ako sa paghahanap. At habang nagtatagal ako sa paghahanap ay nararamdaman ko ang mga kalalakihang sumusunod sa akin. And then someone slapped my butt! Freaking perverts! Masama ang tingin na nilingon ko ang gumawa nun para magsimula ng away subalit nahagip na paningin ko ang isang pamilyar na nakatalikod na lalaki. He was drinking alone on a side bar, so I walked towards him dodging all the ugly, freaking perverts on my way.

Umupo ako sa stool na katabi niya at tiningnan lang naman ako ng barista. I think he wouldn't offer me a drink.

"Hey, Van. We need to talk." Napahinto siya sa akmang pag-inom at dahan-dahang lumingon sa akin. Our eyes met and I was assaulted with feelings I could not interpret as I saw his pain, sorrow and… rage. His deadly rage towards me.

“I’m giving you a chance to escape before I kill you,” he said angrily and drunkenly.

“No. Hindi ako aalis hanggat hindi kita nakakausap!” Matigas kong sagot. I should be scared for my life but he didn’t scare me that way anymore. Not right now. Not like this. A person on my other side tried to put his arms on my shoulder.

“Mukhang hindi siya interesado sa’yo. Pero kung sa akin ka lalapit, hindi ka mabibigo,” wika ng lalaking walang damit pang itaas at puno ng tattoo.

“Don’t touch me or I’ll burn you to the ground!” Galit kong sagot at saka ibinalik ang atensyon kay Van. Nakita kong sobrang higpit ng hawak ni Van sa bote ng Jack Daniels. Balak niya bang ihampas sa akin iyon? “Van, listen to me. Detective Penber wants to talk to you. About Tyler. I know that you’re in too much pain right now. I understand that. Kung iniisip mong kasalanan ko ang lahat-” Hindi ko naituloy ang sasabihin ko dahil marahas at mahigpit niyang hinawakan ang braso ko. D mn. My shoulder wound hurts.

“You don’t know what the f ck I am feeling right now!” He almost growled at me. Music started from the band.

“You’re right! I don’t! I just said that I understand! But what I wanted to tell you was… I… I feel guilty for Tyler’s death! I never wanted this to happen to him!” Isinigaw ko sa kaniya ang mga sinabi ko dahil sa lakas ng musika. Funny. How could Ed Sheeran’s Give Me Love be playing at a place like this? Someone touched my waist but I smacked that hands off.

Hindi ko alam kung dala ba ng stress ng lugar, ng kantang tumutugtog, ng pambabatos ng mga walang kwentang nilalang ditto o ng hindi pakikinig sa akin ni Giovanni Freniere kung kaya’t napaluha na ako. Hell, I’ve never felt so helpless and humiliated like this. I realized na wala akong mapapala rito kung kaya’t nilisan ko ang upuan at tumayo sa likod ni Van. Someone sniffed my hair from behind me but I didn’t care anymore.

“I will leave now, Van. I just came here for Detective Penber. I’m really sorry about Tyler. It brought me pain, too. I saw how he died and it… it was

really freaking hard for me.” Pinahid ko ang luha ko sa pingi. This wasn’t a good place to cry. “Even at the end, Tyler cared for you. He trusts you and… I… I will trust you, too. He said that everything’s gonna be fine so it would be, right?” His body stiffened. Hindi ko alam kung naririnig ba niya ako o hindi. Maybe I wasn’t really making sense. Maybe all of this had been for nothing.

“Goodbye, Van. I hope that, for both our sakes, we never meet again. Thank you for sparing my life.”

And then someone grabbed me from my wounded shoulder. Naramdaman ko ang sakit mula sa nakabenda kong sugat.

“Akin ka na, Miss,” wika ng nakakadiring lalaki sa tabi ko kanina. My mind was already working on an escape plan when Van left his chair and grabbed me from the ugly freak. He smashed the Jack Daniels bottle on the guy’s face and I saw Max moving towards us.

“You can’t just f cking get way from me, Summer,” Van said. He snaked his arm around my waist and put his other hand on the side of my face. His face came closer and then, before I could even react, his lips touched mine. I was shocked and frozen for a few moments then his lips moved gently and suddenly, I couldn’t help but close my eyes. My hands curled in his shirt and he pulled me closer to him. His lips tasted of vodka, strawberry and mint. My mind went from overload to blank. I couldn’t think. Hell, even my heart went to overload and it felt as if I was gonna explode. This was a kiss, right?

Hell yeah, a deadly kiss.

[32] Chapter 32: Autumn and Arturia

Chapter 32: Autumn and Arturia

I was so lost. I felt like my soul just leapt out of my body and couldn’t find its way back. I wasn’t even sure if it wanted to. And in all these uncertainties, there was only one thing that I was sure of. This feeling. This

kiss. My heart in a riot. And I know that if I was to stay like this, I wouldn't be able to find myself anymore.

And then he pulled back. We were still a few centimeters away from each other and I could still feel his lips against mine. I just stared at him with wide eyes.

"Surprised, bitch? I can do whatever I want to do with you now," wika ni Van sa isang nakapanlalamig na tinig. Pinanood ko lang siya nang magsimula siyang maglakad palayo at saka mawala. I was just left there, standing. Nakatulala at napapaligiran ng mga nakakatakot na kriminal. Pero kung may maganda mang idinulot ang ginawang iyon ni Van, iyon ay ang hindi na pagtatangkang lumapit sa akin ng mga nakapanghihilakbot na tao sa lugar na ito. Itinuloy nila ang kanilang ginagawa at maging yung isang mapilit kanina ay hindi na nagtangka pang hawakan ulit ako. That kiss was a protection from this people. Too bad it couldn't protect me from the turmoil I felt within. Hindi ko na rin mahagilap si Old Max. I would try to make sense of what just happened later. Pero sa ngayon, kailangan ko munang makaalis sa lugar na ito.

Hindi naman ako nahirapan. They gave way for me. Tila may sukat ang dapat nilang maging distansiya mula sa akin, so in a few minutes, I was already out. Nagmamadali akong sumakay sa Mustang at mabilis na nag-drive papalayo sa lugar. Hell! I couldn't even find my mind's functions. What had just happened to me? So that was a freaking kiss. That was just a freaking kiss! Why was I acting like an idiot?

Halos hindi ko na namalayang inihinto ko ang sasakyan sa harap ng bahay namin. Subalit hindi ako kumilos at nanatili lang sa loob ng kotse. Nakatitig lang ako sa bahay namin. But it was definitely not our house that I was seeing. I was seeing that dangerous, handsome face. I was seeing that scene. I was seeing what just happened in my mind's eye, again.

"Agh!" Frustrated kong inuntog ang ulo ko sa manibela. "What the hell was that?! Why did he do that?!" And now, I was trying to talk to a car. Ano ba ang nangyayari sa akin? That was just a freaking kiss. My first freaking kiss. And it unnerved me. Nakita ko ang paglabas ni Autumn at paglapit sa akin. Wala sa sariling umibis ako at sinalubong siya.

“Ano’ng nangyari?” Tanong niya.

“Ganyan din ang tanong ko sa sarili ko,” sagot ko at inihagis ko ang susi ng Mustang sa kaniya. Kung sakaling dumating si Detective Penber, then she might as well be the one to give it back to him. I didn’t want to deal with him. Sa ngayon ay mas gusto kong magkulong sa kwarto, matulog at kalimutan muna ang mga nangyari sa araw na ito. Everything was just too frustrating, depressing and confusing. I think I just want to turn everything off.

“WHAT the hell is this?” Pagtataas ko ng boses kay Autumn nang iabot niya sa akin ang isang set ng kulay moss green na uniform. It was a pair of longsleeves and a skirt. It was actually stylish, pretty and girly. But I didn’t do stylish, pretty and girly.

“Arturia school uniform,” nakangiti niyang sagot. I rolled my eyes at her. Couldn’t I just go on my usual tight jeans and stylish shirt?

“Ah, yeah. Hindi ba ginagamit lang yan sa paglalaro ng paper dolls?” Sarkastiko kong tanong. She just shrugged her shoulders. Nakasimangot kong inabot ang uniform. I know too well na wala akong choice kundi ang suotin ito. I chose Arturia and it got rules. So I guess I had to abide by it.

And the uniform fit, thankfully. Mukhang seryoso si Autumn nang sinabi niyang siya na ang bahala sa lahat ng may kinalaman sa paglipat ko. I was on her car’s passenger seat while she was driving. She would never let me drive her car. I wondered why, my overspeeding, harsh overtaking and unlawful U-turns aside. I should have just used Detective Penber’s Mustang. Tutal naman, nasa garahe pa rin naming iyon at hindi pa niya kinukuha.

“I’ll make sure you fit in Arturia,” nakangiting wika ni Autumn nang matanaw naming ang eleganteng building ng all-girls school. It was like a stainless glass and germ-free building. It was surrounded by an enormous gate with flowers and trees around its vast, green ground. I frowned nang pumasok kami at makita ang mga estudyanteng katulad ko rin ang suot at naglalakad sa iba’t ibang bahagi ng school. Now, I noticed that there was also a short-sleeved version of Arturia uniform.

“What is this? A playground for decent girls?” Kunot-noo kong komento nang i-park ni Autumn ang kotse.

“Summer, you are a decent girl. Magiging parte ka na nag disenteng school at magkakaroon ka ng disenteng mga kaibigan,” sagot ni Autumn. Napagtingin ako sa kaniya nang banggitin niya ang “kaibigan.” I remembered Montello High.

“Do I have to change myself para magkaroon ng kaibigan?” Seryoso kong tanong sa kanya at saka umibis ng sasakyan. Nagmamadali siyang humabol sa paglalakad ko. Lots of girls were eyeing us. They looked at Autumn with respect. They watched me like I was a new meat, but then, what was I expecting?

“Summer, alam mong hindi iyon ang ibig kong sabihin. I’m not asking you to change. I’m asking you to be better,” wika ni Autumn habang naglalakad kami.

“I get it. I get it. There will always be some changes. And it’s just fine. I won’t cause any trouble,” seryoso kong sagot sa kaniya. Halos nakikita ko ang devil side ko na tumatawa at nagko-crossed fingers. She seemed unconvinced. But I wouldn’t cause trouble. That part of me was already bound by the thickest ropes and locked up on the far corner inside me. And I would never set it free again.

“I trust you. I know you can do anything. I know you can go through this. I’m just here by your side.” Nakangiting hinawakan ni Autumn ang pisngi ko. It felt comfortable and soothing. I just couldn’t fake a smile yet.

“Good morning, President Leondale.” Pareho kaming lumingon ni Autumn sa bumati. They were a couple of kids who looked fresh out of elementary school. And they were pertaining to Autumn. But wait…

“President?” Tanong ko sa kaniyang nang umalis na ang mga estudyante.

“I’m sorry. Hindi ko nasabi sa’yo. Not that it would matter anyway. I’m the student government president here in Arturia.” Tumango lang ako. Kaya

pala ang bilis niyang naasikaso ang lahat. Maybe I would always encounter council presidents in every school.

Inihatid niya ako sa magiging classroom ko for the rest of the school year. Sa Montello High, meron kang sariling schedule at nag-iiba iba ang mga magiging classmates mo kada subject. But it was different here in Arturia. You would be included in a certain block and the students there would be your blockmates for the rest of the school year.

Autumn touched my cheek before she opened the door for me. “Goodluck, sis.” Narinig kong bulong niya bago ako pumasok. Every pair of eyes turned to me. I guess I really couldn’t do anything about getting attention when I hated it.

“You must be the presiden’t sister?” Nakangiting bati ng classroom instructor sa unahan. President… um, yeah. Autumn. Mukhang hindi ko maiiwasang mahagip ng anino ni Autumn ditto. Tumango lang ako bilang sagot.

“Well, they are going to be your classmates so it will be good to introduce yourself to them first,” sagot ng babaeng instructor as she ushered me to the front of the class. Sinalubong ko ng tingin ang lahat, yung tipong nanghahamon ako ng titigan sa bawat estudyanteng nakatingin sa akin. Lihim akong napangiti nang mapansin kong marami na ang tumungo at nagbawi ng tingin.

“Summer. I’m Summer Leondale,” buo ang boses kong pagpapakilala. Tulad ng inaasahan ko ay tila naghihintay sila ng karugtong sa aking sinabi. Instead, I just gave them my fakest, sweetest smile at saka dumiretso sa bakanteng upuan sa may bandang gitna. I told Autumn that I wouldn’t cause trouble. Well, smiling to everyone was a far thing from trouble, right?

“You’re Autumn Leondale’s sister? Yung president sa College department?” Tanong ng katabi kong estudyante. She was tanned with curly brown hair and round gray eyes. Well, she was pretty and looked smart. Ano pa bang ini-expect ko sa mga estudyante ng Arturia?

I returned her with a smile. “Yes,” sagot ko.

“Well, you’re beautiful like her. You must be a genius, too,” nakangiti niyang sabi.

“I’m not as genius as here but I’m not stupid.” Ops! Kumakawala nang paunti-unti ang sarcasm sa bibig ko. I hoped she didn’t notice. And it seemed like she didn’t. Inabot niya ang kamay sa akin.

“I’m Maggie.”

I took her hand. “Summer,” mahina kong sabi. It sounded stupid for me na ipakilala kong muli ang sarili ko.

“Maybe we can have lunch together-”

“Thank you, Maggie, pero gusto kong puntahan si Autumn for lunch.” Well, that wasn’t the actual reason. It was just that, everything she said and did was very formal and I hated formalities.

“Is that so? How about the library, after class?” Uh. Library. Of course, this was Arturia. At priority ng mga tao rito ang knowledge at decency, hindi mga gang fights.

“Titingnan ko, Maggie.” I smiled as the class instructor saved me from the conversation. Apparently, her name was Miss Nemor and she teaches world literature. Arturia had an effective teaching technique at nakita ko na lang ang sarili ko nakikinig sa maghapong klase. I excelled even on my first day. Hindi man ipinapakita ng mga estudyante rito ang kanilang insecurities, alam kong iniisip nilang threat ako sa kanilang rankings. Well, they were actually friendly but I still didn’t know if they were being nice to me because I was Autumn’s sister.

On my third day, I managed to keep up with my good girl streak but I still wasn’t used to this school. Palaging may comparisons sa isip ko. Palagi kong iniisip kong ano kaya ang possible kong ginagawa sa Montello at any given time, sakaling naroon pa rin ako. Well, definitely not here at the library. I might be at the corner, getting bitched by the student council president. Jin might be pestering me as usual and Jamie and Mirden would

laugh at my expense. I'd be unfortunately caught between gang wars. I'd be hurt, scattered and wounded. And I wouldn't care at all.

I'd be probably thinking about Tyler. Or having more sleepless nights because of the kiss, like I always did. Like I always think about whether or not he thinks of that kiss now and then, or all the time as well. Or maybe not. Van Freniere was a playboy and he was used to kissing girls on a whim. What was one kiss to a girl he hated with all he had mean to him? But, I didn't care. Nope, I didn't care at all.

Kung nasa Montello ako ngayon, I'd probably be scared for my own life and the lives of the people around me. But at least I had something. I knew where I stand. Hindi tulad rito, hindi ko na alam kung sino ako.

"Summer! Summer!" Napakurap ako sa pakikipagtitigan sa libro at saka nilingon si Maggie. "Uhm, nagbabasa ka ba? Kanina ka pa kasi sa page na yan, eh," wika niya. Bumuntong hininga ako at saka isinara ang libro. I didn't feel like reading right now. I felt like I was only here with a book on my hand, not to learn but because of vanity.

"I'm sorry, Maggie. Pwede bang mauna na ako sa'yo?" Wika ko sa kaniya.

"I can go with you," sagot niya. I started to protest subalit nauna na siyang maglakad at naglog-out sa library. Sumunod ako sa kaniya. We were on our way out nang may makabangga kaming grupo ng mga estudyante. Matatangkad sila at nagmamadali kung kaya't medyo malakas ang impact ng pagkabangga. Dahil doon ay napasalampak si Maggie sa sahig. I was left standing firm. Sa dami ng mga naranasan kong basag-ulo, it would take more than this to sway me on my feet. Mabilis kong napasadahan ng tingin ang kaharap ko. They were a beautiful and athletic group. They were wearing sports uniforms with nonsensical numbers on them. Female basketball players? Mabilis kong ina-assess ang grupo. At bago pa man sila makalagpas ay hinawakan ko ang braso ng babaeng may naiibang uniform.

"Excuse me?" She towered and eyed me with scrutiny. Sinalubong ko rin ang tingin niya. Huminto rin ang lahat ng kasama niya at tumingin sa amin. Maggie eyed us with open-mouthed shock.

“A simple ‘sorry’ will do,” sagot ko at saka nilingon ang direksyon ni Maggie na nakasalampak pa rin sa sahig. My words brought me back to a memory, kung kalian nagdemand din ako ng sorry mula sa isang… stop, Summer! Don’t think about it anymore. Hindi naman nagbago ang ekspresyon ng babaeng kaharap ko. She was really a beauty, with long, straight black hair and green eyes. She should be a ramp model instead of engaging in sports. But still, the uniform suited her well.

“Nagmamadali kami. Ang everyone here knows to get out of our way kapag tumatakbo kami papunta sa gym. I’d bet you are a transferee,” she said in a monotone and ironically, soft voice.

“Not a good excuse for not giving an apology,” seryoso ko ring sagot.

Tinapunan niya ng tingin si Maggie. “Are you hurt?” Seryoso niyang tanong. Tumungo lang si Maggie bilang sagot. That was weird. Hindi ka mapapasalampak sa sahig nang ganun kalakas at hindi man lang masaktan. Why was she having this kind of reaction to this person?

Huminga nang malalim ang babaeng hawak ko sa braso at ikinagulat ko ang muli niyang sinabi. “Ipagpaumanhin niyo. Kung pwede lang na sa susunod na magkaroon ulit ng ganitong sitwasyon, sana’y bigyan niyo kami ng daan.” Paghingi niya ng paumanhin. Everyone looked at her, amazed. Kahit ako ay natigilan. Masyado siyang pormal at magalang.

“Can you let me go now?” Tanong niya na ako ang pinatutungkulan. Walang imik na binitawan ko ang braso niya. I watched them as they continued running towards the gym.

“Summer, thank you pero hindi mo na dapat ginawa iyon,” wika ni Maggie na nasa tabi ko na. Ipinagpatuloy ko ang paglalakad at sumunod siya.

“Well, I just did that I think was right. Minsan lang ako gumawa ng tama so I don’t think na kailangan ko iyong pigilan,” nakangiti kong sagot. Ugh, matatanggal na ang jaw ko kakangiti.

“Yes, you’re quite right. But, uhm, do you have any idea who she is?” May pangambang tanong niya. Kunot-noo ko siyang sinulyapan.

“Who is she?” Tanong ko.

“She’s Henrietta. Henrietta Arturia. Nagmula sa pamilyang nagtayo ng school na ito. Everyone here loves her. She is really smart and talented. No one dares to harass her.” So she was a high-profiled student. She was powerful, too. Wait…

“Harass? I didn’t harass her,” protesta ko.

“Yung pagpigil mo at paghawak mo sa braso niya. That was so rude. At saka wala pang nakakapag-utos sa kaniya ng mga bagay like apologizing… and you just did that.” I rolled my eyes at Maggie.

“Because it was her fault,” mahinahon kong wika. Gusto ko nang magpalit into bitch mode pero I stopped myself. I shouldn’t create trouble for Autumn.

“Pero hindi naman ako nasaktan,” sabi ni Maggie at pareho kaming tumingin sa tuhod niyang unti-unti nang nahahalata ang pasa.

“I used to think na matatalino ang mga tao rito. Well, you just proved me wrong,” seryoso kong sagot at saka siya iniwan. Idiots. They were all over the world. What will happen if they invaded the earth?

“WHO told you to participate in a car racing-no, scratch that! Car bumping event?” Nanlalaki ang mga matang tanong ni Detective Penber habang nakatingin sa pulang vintage Mustang. Nadatnan ko siya sa bahay na kausap si Daddy. It seemed that he was waiting for me from school to get his car.

Kumamot lang ako sa ulo bilang tugon. He ran his fingers through the dent where Old Max smashed his hand. Okay pa naman yung car, eh. Yun nga lang, mukhang hindi pinalalampas ni Detective Penber ang bawat detalye ng kaniyang Mustang.

“What did you do to my car?” Naghihisterya niyang sabi.

“I… I just… well… Inutusan mo akong pumunta ng Freniere mansion. How can you expect me to comeback without damage?” Sarkastiko kong tanong sa kaniya. Huh. Na-miss ko ring maging sarcastic.

“That’s exactly my question. You managed to come back unscathed pero bakit hindi ang kotse ko?” He demanded.

I just shrugged. “We have to make sacrifices,” kampante kong sagot.

“And you used my car as a sacrifice?!” Mataas ang boses niyang tanong. Detective Penber seemed agitated that usual. At mukhang hindi lang dahil sa halos pinaslang ko ang malamang ay mamahalin niyang vintage car.

I dropped my calmness at nameywang. “And what? Mas pipiliin mong ako ang mapahamak kesa sa kotse mo? You should be thankful because I let you use me on that suicide mission na ikaw lang ang nakikinabang. And since I did my part, I think you better give me my stuff!” Galit kong sagot kasabay ng paglalahad ng kamay ko sa kaniya. He brushed his fingers through his hair at kinuha ang notebook at baril mula sa inside jacket niya. I grabbed it quickly and put it inside my bag. Wow, now I was a uniformed kid with a gun in her bag.

“You shouldn’t bring that to your school,” wika niya.

“They’re just scanning. They don’t have metal detectors,” sagot ko sa kaniya.

“I already talked to him.” Natigilan ako sa anunsiyo ng detective. He talked to him. Didn’t that mean na tagumpay ang misyon ko? “He’s not going back to Montello,” patuloy niya. Hindi ako kumibo ng ilang sandali. Nakatitig lang ako sa Mustang. “There are a lot of mazes in this investigation. When I reach a point where I’m on to something, may nagba-block ng daan at napipilitan akong lumiko sa ibang direksyon.”

“Detective Penber, please. I really don’t care anymore,” pigil ko sa kanya. But there was this part of me who wanted to hear more. Merong bahagi ko ang gustong magtanong, gustong malaman ang posibleng mangyari. And I knew that I shouldn’t. I couldn’t feel this way anymore.

“I can’t access Montello High now. Hindi ko na alam kung ano’ng nangyayari sa loob nito,” dagdag niya na ikinaangat ng tingin ko.

“What?” Hindi ko na napigilang magtanong. I knew that once I ask questions, I would be in trouble.

“Something is happening inside and I don’t have any idea what it is nor do I have any means to access that information.” Bakas ang frustration sa boses ni Detective Penber.

“How about Jin? Hindi ba’t sumali na siya sa imbestigasyon?” Yes, apparently, nang umalis ako ng Montello ay nagprisinta si Jin Cast na maging agent ni Detective Penber sa loob, espionage at suicide missions! What was he thinking?! Hindi niya ba alam ang klase ng panganib na pinapasok niya?!

“After the incident with Tyler del Valle, hindi na nagpapapasok ng outsider ang school. Ang sabi ng administration, they are going to conduct their own investigation. Nagshut-down ang communications sa labas at pwede lang maka-access sa mga estudyante at tauhan sa pamamagitan ng approved channels. I can’t even contact Mirden, or Jin Cast-”

I cut him off. “If this is your way to lure me again to be your bait, I’m sorry but I still won’t do it. Everything in my life is fine now. I’m doing good in Arturia. Seryoso ako nang sinabi kong iiwan ko na ang lahat.” I said firmly. But so, habang sinasabi ko ito ay may nagging feeling akong nararamdaman. My own instinct was telling me something was wrong. Nakaramdam ako ng kaba pero hindi ko ipinakita sa detective. Seryoso akong tinitigan ni Detective Penber as if something is wrong with me.

“No, you can’t see my point, Summer. Nothing is okay. Nothing is fine here. Things are getting dangerous in Montello! Hindi ka ba nag-aalala? The next thing we know, wala na lahat ng taong mahalaga sa iyo sa lugar na iyon,” diin niya.

I looked at him flatly. “Even so, hindi na ako parte ng Montello. I am moving on.”

“You’re just blinded by thoughts of moving on! You think it’s just that simple? You’ll run away, forget everything that happened at expect that everything will be fine? Don’t be stupid. We both know that everything is not and I know you feel it, too! Naranasan mo mismo ang gulo ng sitwasyon! Don’t pretend like you don’t know anything bad is happening.” Walang ngiting sumakay siya ng kotse. I simply watched him as he started the engine. Before he left, he said, “That uniform looks cute on you.” At saka niya pinatakbo ang Mustang.

Sinikap kong pigilan ang sarili ko upang hubarin ang aking sapatos at ibato sa papalayong sasakyan. Mahigpit ang kapit sa bag na pumasok ako sa bahay. I felt the cold, hard, little thing inside my bag. This is mine now. But what am I gonna do with this? Everything in my life is fine now. If that’s true, then why should I need this?

[33] Chapter 33: No Escaping The Deadly Rose

Chapter 33: No Escaping the Deadly Rose

The day started normally. No dragging arms. No ambush gangster attack. No assassinations. No bloods and wounds. I only got books and pen, notebooks and this fancy uniform. It was a very normal, boring day until I entered Arturia’s cafeteria. It was actually a very feminine and comfy place, except everyone was staring at me.

Nang makakuha na ako ng pagkain ay pinili kong maupo sa pinakamalapit na bakanteng upuan at mesa. I saw Maggie talking to another group of students. Saka ko lang napansin ang grupo ng mga nakabangga ko kahapon na kumakain sa di-kalayuan mula sa akin. Tinapunan nila ako ng tingin habang nag-uusap. Tahimik namang kumakain si Henrietta Arturia. She was very pretty and elegant even with her school uniform. At di katulad ng mga kasamahan niya, hindi man lang siya lumilingon sa direksyon ko.

Lumapit si Maggie sa mesa ko at saka umupo sa harap. “Everyone knows what you did yesterday and they are very curious about you.” That stopped me for a moment at sinikap kong huwag salubungin ng masasamang tingin ang mga estudyante sa paligid ko.

Huminga ako ng malalim at saka ngumiti kay Maggie. “Curiosity kills.” I bit my pepperoni pizza. Mukhang masarap gumawa ng pizza ang cafeteria ng school.

“Well, dito kasi, once na naging against ka sa isang high-profiled na estudyante, nagiging against din sa’yo ang lahat. Pag-uusapan ka at ang lahat ng bagay na pangit tungkol sa’yo,” sagot ni Maggie. Sa isang normal na sitwasyon, wala akong paki-alam sa sasabihin ng ibang tao tungkol sa akin. Subalit rito, kailangan kong isipin si Autumn. Kailangan kong maalala na president ng Student Council ng Arturia ang kapatid ko. Kailangang tuparin ko ang pangako kong hindi na gagawa ng gulo.

I smiled a sweet, fake smile. “Hindi ko naman intension na sumalungat at maghamon ng gulo kay Henrietta Arturia. Isa lang akong transferee at ang tanging pakay ko lang ay mag-aral.” I gritted my teeth. This sucked.

“Naiintindihan kita, Summer. Pero hindi basta-basta maakalimutan ng lahat ang nangyari kahapon.”

I looked at her. “So, what do I have to do?” Tanong ko.

“Apologize, maybe?” Sagot niya. I dropped my pizza on my plate at nilingon ang direksyon ni Henrietta Arturia. Ganun pa rin siya tulad kanina. Tila walang pakialam sa nangyayari sa paligid niya.

“Wala akong ginawa na dapat kong ihingi ng tawad,” seryoso kong sabi.

“Well, we both know that. But if you want to prevent any trouble from happening, then sa tingin ko, mas mabuti na ang hakbang na ito. Dahil kung ang magiging katapat ng pangalan mo ay ang pangalang ‘Henrietta Arturia,’ kahit anong gawin mo, talo ka,” paliwanag niya. Para sa isang duwag na nilalang, masyado siyang maraming sinasabi. Tumayo ako mula sa aking kinauupuan at saka naglakad tungo sa di-kalayuang mesa kung saan naroon at tahimik na kumakain ang taong tila mataas na pader kung ilarawan ni Maggie.

Naramdaman kong tumigil ang nakararami sa kanilang ginagawa at ibinuhos ang atensyon nila sa direksyon ko. Mukhang kahit na anong gawin

ko ay hindi na mawawala ang pares ng matang nakabantay sa akin. Lumapit ako sa grupo ni Henrietta at tumayo sa likuran niya. Everyone didn't flinch as if this was a scene in a movie they wouldn't want to miss. Well, almost everyone. Henrietta seemed unconcerned about what was happening around her.

Huminga ako ng malalim. "I'm sorry." Tanging tinig ko lang ang naririnig sa cafeteria, at ang marahang pagbaba ni Henrietta sa kaniyang kutsara at tinidor. Ilang segundo ang lumipas. Hinihintay ng lahat ang kaniyang sasabihin.

"Wala akong maalalang ginawa mo sa akin." Even her voice was nice and soft but full of authority. I could sense power behind it.

"Well, yung kahapon. Nung nakaharang ako sa grupo niyo habang nagmamadali kayo." Masasabi kong buo pa rin ang boses ko habang nakikipag-usap sa kaniya.

"Hindi ko na iyon maalala. Ni hindi ko nga maalala ang mukha mo, eh," sagot niya. Muli siyang sumubo ng kaniyang kinakain. Hindi ko maiwasang hindi mainsulto. Who the heck was this crap to make me feel like I was insignificant? I didn't do anything wrong but for the sake of peace, ako ang nanghingi ng tawad only to find out na hindi niya man lang ako natatandaan? Pinigil ko ang sarili kong hilahin siya patayo at iharap sa akin.

"Eh, paano mo maaalala ang mukha ko, hindi mo naman ako tinitingnan?" Kalmado kong komento. She stopped from eating. The atmosphere became cold and dangerous, which was strange. Why should a girl like her bring this kind of tension? Naramdaman ko ang mumunting kagat ng takot sa dibdib ko ngunit pinipilit ko iyong iwaksi. Why would I feel like this? What was up with this girl?

Tumayo siya at humarap sa akin. "Mukha ka ngang pamilyar." Seryoso niyang sabi. Everyone knew what I did yesterday, samantalang siya, yun lang ang masasabi niya? Was this her talent? Ang ignorahin ang lahat ng tao at bagay na nangyayari sa paligid niya? "Kung ano man ang ginawa mo, hindi ko na maalala. Kaya maaari mo na rin iyong kalimutan," wika niya at saka bumalik sa pagkain. Everyone continued on what they were doing. I

was just left standing there, astonished on the stupidity that I had done. I walked back to Maggie, grabbed my things and stormed out of the cafeteria.

Isa lang ang tumatakbo sa isip ko noon. Henrietta was a robot. A perfectly created, female robot.

“YOU shouldn’t have done that.”

Lumingon ako sa pinanggalingan ng boses. Nasa veranda ako at nakaupo sa pasimano nang pumasok si Autumn. Kadalasan, mas nauuna akong umuwi sa kaniya. Malamang, masyado siyang maraming ginagawa. And I know what she was talking about. Henrietta Arturia.

“Alin ang hindi ko dapat ginawa? Ang tumayo sa dinaraanan ng nagmamadaling si Henrietta o ang humingi ng tawad sa pagkakataong iyon na hindi naman kasalanan at hindi rin naman maalala?” Seryoso kong tanong sa kaniya. I messed up. I felt really messed up.

“Ang baguhin ang sarili mo,” sagot ni Autumn na ikinatigil ko. “Hindi mo kailangang magpanggap, Summer, para lang bumagay ka sa Arturia. You’re not doing it any better. We trusted you but it doesn’t mean you have to pretend to be someone you’re not,” dagdag pa niya.

“But I am not pretending!” Protesta ko. Pero sino bang niloloko ko? Lahat ng mga ginagawa ko-greetings, apologies, conversations and fake smiles, all of those was not me. I was, indeed, pretending. And look where I ended up: becoming a stupid sideshow.

“Tell that to yourself, Summer. Hindi ako nag-i-expect ng isang mabait at well-behaved na kapatid because that wouldn’t be you. Go back to being yourself, Summer. You won’t be able to move on by running away,” wika niya. I fought back the tears that started to sting my eyes. I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to waste my tears.

“Go back to myself?” Mapait akong ngumiti sa kaniya. “Go back to myself and attempt to move on? Do you think it’s that easy? You don’t know how hard I try everyday para lang hindi ko maalala ang pagkawala ni Tyler. Wala ka naman noong time na nag-aagaw buhay si Mirden at kailangan kong

isakripisyo ang sarili ko. Hindi naman ikaw yung muntik nang mamatay kaya paano mo nasasabi ang mga bagay na yan na parang ganun lang iyon kadali?" Nanginginig ang boses kong sabi.

Lumapit siya sa akin at saka ako niyakap. "I'm sorry," aniya. This was how she always handled the dark things that I experience. She was just going to hug me. I wonder if she thought that her hugs and affection would make everything magically better.

Kumalas ako sa pagkakayakap niya at saka tumingin sa malayo. Nang hindi na ako magtangkang magsalita pa ay nagpasya na lang siyang iwan ako. I thought I was going to find myself. It seemed that the more I try to move on, the more I get lost.

ANOTHER day. Mukhang gumana ang paghingi ko ng walang kwentang kapatawaran. Bumalik na sa normal ang lahat. Nakakakuha pa rin ako ng atensyon subalit hindi na ganun ka-negatibo. I was doing good in my class standing and I had never been involved in any trouble. Papunta na kami ni Maggie sa library nang mapasulyap ako sa gym. I hadn't been in there. At sa loob niyan ay naroon si Henrietta Arturia. There was something about her. Something that made me curious and scared at the same time. Bad feeling. Nang huling maramdaman ko ito sa Montello, hindi maganda ang mga sumunod na nangyari. I hoped it was just my bored imagination, trying to excite things up.

"Mauna ka na, Maggie. Susunod ako," wika ko kay Maggie. Nagtaka siya sandal subalit minabuti na lang niyang mauna. Naglakad ako papunta sa gym. I was hoping that I was not walking towards trouble again. The gymnasium was enormous and elegant. At tulad nga ng inaasahan ko, nagpapractice na ang Arturia Women's basketball team. Henrietta was being guarded by three players but she made a quick, impressive move and dribbled her way for an excellent two-point shot. Pumalakpak ang coach at ang mangilan-ngilang nanunuod. Hindi ko alam kung gaano ako katagal na nakatayo roon. Isang loose ball ang napunta sa kinaroroonan ko. They waited for me to get the ball. Lumapit ako sa kanila at ipinasa iyon kay Henrietta.

“Nice pass,” komento niya. “You wanna play with us?” Dagdag niya na ikinagulat ko. Was she inviting me to play with the school’s varsity?

“Arturia! You have to take this practice seriously!” Sigaw ng coach nila mula sa kabilang bahagi ng gym.

“I’ve been practicing with the same players for a long time. I’m pretty sure they’re not gonna be my opponents on the real game,” sagot niya. Hindi sumagot ang lalaking coach na may kalakihan ang katawan. Umiling na lang ito bilang pagsuko. Hinihintay naman ng lahat ang sasabihin ko.

I didn’t play basketball regularly but I do know how to play. And I think I was kinda good at it. Humakbang ako papasok sa linya at ang kasunod nun ay ang mabilis na pagpapasa sa akin ni Henrietta ng bola. Kung isa akong normal na mahinang babaeng estudyante, baka natumba na ako sa lakas ng kanyang pagpasa. But I wasn’t born a weakling kung kaya’t mahigpit ang kapit kong sinalo ang bola at saka nagdribble. Everyone except Henrietta and me stayed out of the court. It seemed like this was going to be a one-on-one game. Henrietta positioned to guard me seriously. I could see fierceness and wonder in her eyes. I ran and dribbled the ball towards the ring. I thought I was fast enough but she was faster. She snatched the ball away as I was dribbling it. She ran away pero agad akong nakarekober at mabilis na humarang sa daraanan niya with my arms wide open. I would never let her pass! I thought she was going to halt but she didn’t. Mukhang babanggain niya ako. I positioned myself in strong defense. I wouldn’t let her put me down. She would never catch a break in my defensive wall.

Subalit mukhang hindi ang maka-shoot ang puntirya niya. Mukhang balak niyang pabagsakin ako. I gritted my teeth as she slammed on me. She was strong and it made an immediate impact. I made a couple of steps back and managed to stay upright. Nagtama ang mga mata namin at nakita ko ang pagkagulat doon. Hindi niya siguro inaasahan na matatapatan ko ang lakas niya. My chest hurt. My whole body was trembling but I felt a sudden adrenaline rush and took the momentum. I snatched the ball from her and dribbled back to my ring as fast as I could. She ran after me. I jumped for a two-point shot. She tried to stop me by jumping closely against my body. Suddenly, I found my bitch mode and I quickly bended my right knee. It made an impact to her stomach, making her fall. I made the shot.

A successful two-point shot with Henrietta’s ass down the floor.

Walang nagtangkang kumilos sa kanilang kinatatayuan o kahit magsalita. Mukhang kahit ang paghinga nila ay pigil. Tanging ang talbog lang ng bola ang umaalingawngaw sa malaking gym.

“Mukhang wala akong panahong maglaro. Mas nanaisin ko pa yatang tumambay sa library,” basag ng boses ko sa katahimikan. Hindi pa rin sila kumilos o nagsalita. Nakatingin lang sila sa akin na tila isa akong uri ng alien. And it was really starting to be awkward now.

Ibinaba ako ang paningin k okay Henrietta. I couldn’t see any anger-or any emotions-in her eyes. She was simply staring at me, or studying me. Huminga ako ng malalim at inalok ko ang kamay ko sa kaniya upang tulungan siyang tumayo. Ngumiti siya at saka tinanggap ang kamay ko.

“You did great,” seryoso niyang sabi.

“Ahm, thanks?” May pag-aatubili kong sagot. She was really different. Normally, kapag nagkakaroon ng ganitong senaryo, I would reserve bitchy remarks. But Henrietta Arturia was different. I know there was something about her. I was just not sure what makes her so.

Lumapit sa amin ang coach at ibang players.

“If you’ll excuse me,” paalam ni Henrietta at saka siya umalis. The coach tapped a hand on my shoulder.

“That one-on-one was a little violent and painful. Subalit wala akong matandaang pangyayari na bumagsak at natalo ang isang Henrietta Arturia sa isang baguhan na tulad mo,” wika niya.

“I’m just lucky, I guess,” sagot ko.

“I don’t think it had something to do with luck. How about joining the team?” Nagulat ako sa alok niya. Hindi ba niya nakitang gumawa ako ng isang offensive foul? Gusto kong simulan ang sentimyento ko tungkol sa

mga walang kwentang bagay na pinag-aaksayahan ng lakas but I decided not to. I didn't know the extent of the importance they give to these things.

"Pag-iisipan ko po. Gusto ko lang po ngayong gumamit ng gym's shower room. Excuse me," pagpapaalam ko. Well, I was sweaty and stinky. I was afraid that the smell would cling to the uniform if I didn't took a shower. Jeez.

Tumakbo ako sa room sa kabilang dulo ng gym. I was a little bit disappointed nang makitang mukhang pangkalahatan at walang division ang shower room. I grabbed a towel and stripped off my clothes at saka pumasok sa shower room. It smelled like rose and vanilla and I could hear the rush of water. I started towards one of the showerheads nang mahagip ng paningin ko ang mala-modelong katawan ng nagsashower sa di-kalayuan. She had smooth, white skin, small waist, tall and very curvaceous. When she turned to my direction, I was assaulted with green eyes. I stopped not because of insecurity. I stopped because she was Henrietta Arturia. I was paralyzed because of what was on her back.

"Wala bang nagsabi sa'yo na walang pwedeng pumasok kapag gamit ko ang shower room?" Seryoso niyang tanong. Hindi ko iyon pinansin. Naglakad lang ako papalapit sa kaniya. "What do you think are you doing?" Muli niyang tanong. She didn't really mind that I was seeing her naked but I didn't mind either. It wasn't my concern. I felt the drops of water on my shoulder when I stopped next to her.

Mukha namang naintindihan niya ang balak kong gawin. Humarap siya ng diretso at iniwas ang likod niya mula sa akin. I grabbed her right arm at pilit siyang inikot pataliikod but she resisted it.

"What do you want?" She snapped at me. Now she was wary, and deadly. I felt a chill with the warning in her eyes. It was like she was daring me to piss her. Yun bang naghihintay na lang siya ng isang dahilan para patulan ako.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded. Kung tama ang hinala ko, siguradong hindi siya pangkaraniwang estudyante ng Arturia. Well, she was not really

ordinary afterall. There was something here, something deadly and dangerous.

“I don’t do proper introductions to anyone,” matatag niyang sabi. She was not leaving my eyes. Naramdaman kong nag-iingat siya sa maaari kong ikilos. At tama ang iniisip niya. Gamit ang buong lakas ko ay hinila ko ang kaniyang kanang braso at pinihit siya patalikod. She attempted to resist subalit mas nanaig ang pagkuha ko sa momentum ng pagkabigla niya. Wala na siyang nagawa nang matitigin ko kung ano ang nasa likod niya. It sent cold shivers down my spine. I walked back.

This isn’t happening.

I had seen this before. Isang anghel, itim na rosas na may gintong tangkay at ang letrang F. I should have known that there was no escaping from this deadly rose.

“This is the Freniere mafia crest,” mahina kong sabi habang nakatitig sa tattoo sa kaniyang likod. Sa sobrang gulat ko ay hindi ko namalayan ang pagkuha niya ng tuwalya at pagtapi sa kaniyang katawan.

“You seem to know something. Ngayon, ikaw ang tatanungin ko. Sino ka?” Seryoso niyang tanong. Hindi makapaniwalang tinitigan ko siya. Talaga bang hindi niya ako kilala o nagmamaang-maangan lang siya? Pinapasakay niya ba ako bago niya gawin ang misyon niya: to kill me. Nagpadala ang Freniere ng tatapos sa buhay ko. Sweet.

“Hindi mo ako kilala? Wala ka bang kahit ano’ng impormasyon tungkol sa akin?” Tanong ko.

“Kung dapat kitang makilala, malalaman ko ang lahat ng mga bagay tungkol sa’yo. Mula sa pinakamaliit at walang kwentang detalye hanggang sa maari mong idulot sa organisasyon. Ngayon, kung isa ka lang estudyante na naghahanap ng thrill sa buhay, mas makabubuting kalimutan mo na lang ang mga nalalaman at nakita mo,” seryoso niyang sabi at saka nagsimulang maglakad palayo.

Hindi niya ako kilala. Maniniwala ba ako? “I’m Summer Leondale. Talaga bang wala kang alam tungkol sa akin?” Hindi ko alam kung nagiging tanga na ako sa sobrang paranoid. D mn. Isa lang ang malinaw, konektado siya sa Mafia. The last time I’ve been this close to the mafia, I had gotten in trouble. They wanted me dead at hindi ko maialis sa isip ko na maaaring nagpadala sila ng isang tao para tapusin ako.

Tinapunan niya ako ng tingin mula ulo hanggang paa na tila pinag-aaralan niya ang bawat detalye ng kabuuan ko. “Leondale? Are you connected to Autumn Leondale?” Kaswal niyang tanong.

“Hindi iyon ang ibig kong sabihin. Hindi ba ipinadala ka ng Freniere Mafia para tapusin ako?” Diretsa ko nang tanong. Pinigil ko ang paghinga habang hinihintay ang isasagot niya. I knew this was one crazy move. Confronting the person who possibly wants you dead? Not a good idea.

Tiningnan niya ako ng mataman. Mukhang nakuha ko ang atensyon niya. “You are not my usual target. At kung isa ka sa black list, malamang na noong nagkabangga tayo, bumagsak ka sa lupa at hindi na nakabangon pa,” malamig niyang sagot at saka dumiretso sa paglalakad. Tila dumodoble ang patak ng tubig sa tensyong nararamdaman ko. Subalit bago pa tuluyang iwan ni Henrietta ang shower room ay lumingon siya sa akin.

“If the Mafia wants you dead, you would be by now. So, consider yourself lucky,” wika niya at saka tuluyang umalis. And I was just left there, cold and under the painful waterfall.

Lucky? Was I really lucky? If she was right, then why the hell did I end up in a school with another reaper when I was trying to run from the death of one?

Henrietta Arturia. Mafia Reaper 2.0. And she called this lucky.

[34] Chapter 34: For the Most Invited

Chapter 34: For the Most Invited

“...Montello High School?”

Awtomatikong napalingon ako sa direksyon na pinanggalingan ng konbersasyon. Normally, hindi ko pinakikinggan ang kahit na anong usapan sa cafeteria subalit agad na naalarma ang utak ko nang marinig ko ang school na aking iniwan. It still had that effect on me.

“That’s a scary school! Hindi ko nga alam kung paanong tumatagal ang mga estudyante sa lugar na iyon.”

“It’s a boarding school. Who knows whats happening behind those gates.”

Ipinagpatuloy ko ang pagkain ko at pinilit na huwag making sa pinag-uusapan sa kabilang mesa. I shouldn’t be affected by now. After what happened between me and Henrietta yesterday, hindi ko na pwedeng hayaang magulo ang sarili ko ng mga ganitong bagay.

“Do you know that school?” Tanong ni Maggie. Of course! How could I not know that school? Subalit mas pinili ko na lang na hindi sumagot. Iti-take advantage ko na lang ang privacy na ino-offer ng Arturia University. No one really knew that I came from Montello High except, maybe from the members of the administration that Autumn talked to para ayusin ang paglipat ko.

“Bakit kaya nag-i-exist ang ganoong school? Bakit may mga estudyanteng mas pinipili pumasok sa ganoong klase ng school?” Tahimik na komento ni Maggie.

“Because there are types of students that a normal school couldn’t handle,” mahina kong sagot. Hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit nagkaroon ako ng urge na ipagtanggol ang Montello. I just didn’t think it was right to talk about it and all the unknown and dangerous things inside it.

“Speaking of school, saang school ka nga pala galing?” Tanong ni Maggie. Hindi ako sumagot. Pinagmukha ko na lang na abala ang sarili ko sa pagkain ng pizza. Mukha namang naintindihan niya dahil hindi na niya ipinursue pa ang kaniyang katanungan.

“Have you heard anything about Montello High? Well, malamang ay kilala mo ang school na iyon. It’s definitely a creepy school. Ano kayang

curriculum sa school na iyon? Street Fighting 101? Way of Bitches 203? Eh, I can't imagine." I watched her as she listed her points about Montello.

Uminom muna ako ng cold chocolate drink bago sumagot. "Don't imagine. You have no idea," seryoso kong sabi.

"They say that there's something weird happening inside that school. It was being closed off kahit di naman literally nakasara. Yung walang sinuman ang nasa school na iyon ang gustong mag-open sa mga nangyayari sa loob. I can't describe what exactly pero yun ang usap-usapan. It's vague. And creepy."

I stopped for a moment from eating. What Maggie said caught my complete attention. Maaaring ito rin ang pinag-uusapan ng mga estudyante sa kabilang mesa. "Are you sure about that?" Tangi kong tanong. Ayokong ipahalata ang matinding kyuryosidad ko tungkol dito.

"Well, yun ang nababalitaan namin. But, who knows? Montello High school is really popular no matter how horrible its reputation is. I was wondering kung ano'ng klase ng mga estudyante ang naroon. If I meet someone from that school, I might get scared of him or her."

Gusto kong tumawa dahil sa sinabi niya. What would her reaction be kapag nalaman niyang galing ako sa Montello High? Hindi na ako nagpakita ng anumang interes sa usapan. But the vague news got me wondering too. Ano ba talaga ang nangyayari sa Montello High? I knew I should be escaping from all the things connected to that place. I shouldn't be thinking about this anymore. Subalit nagpa-flash sa utak ko ang mga mukha ng mga taong naiwan ko roon. What happened to Mirden and Jamie? Ano'ng kabaliwan na naman ang naglalaro sa utak ni Jin? How about Ethan and his hell of Student Council? Ilang babae nab a ang napapasakamay na naman ni Makki? Oh, crap! This is bad.

Ni hindi ko namalayan ang paglipas ng mga araw sa Arturia. I was getting used to my lifestyle right now, if you translate getting used to to being numb about it. And even though everything seemed normal and fine now, it still felt wrong. It still felt like I was missing something. That even though I was safe now, some part of me wanted to go back.

That day, I started the day like I always do but the atmosphere on the whole school was different. There was something on the hallway. Nakikita ko sa mga mukha ng mga estudyante ang excitement.

The Grand Christmas Ball

Arturia University

December 15, 2012

This was posted all over the walls. Mukhang pagkakita na pagkakita pa lang nila sa anunsyong ito ay nakabuo na agad sila ng plano kung ano susuotin, sino'ng isasama at kung anu-ano pa. Posible rin na tradisyon na ito kaya noong isang taon pa ay planado na nila kung paano magiging perfect para sa kanila ang gabing iyon. As for me, I put on my blank face at dumiretso sa paglalakad. Ayokong bigyan ng atensyon ang ganung mga walang kwentang bagay.

December 15. Just a few days from now. And on the 17th I will… Uh. Bakit ko ba iisipin ang mga ganung bagay? It was not like I like celebrating birthdays.

"Summer!" Agad kong naramdaman ang pag-akbay ni Maggie sa balikat ko. "Who's going to be your date at the ball?" Tanong niya.

Nagkibit-balikat ako. "I don't think I'm going to attend," pormal kong sagot. Nakita ko ang disappointment na rumehistro sa mukha niya.

"Why not? You should really be there! Alam mo bang lahat ng tao ay nanaising masaksihan ang snowy white Christmas themed ball ng Arturia University? Yun din ang time na pwede mong ipagmalaki sa mga estudyante at irampa ang boyfriend mo. Di ba masaya yun?" Mataas ang energy na wika niya habang nananatiling walang reaksyon ang mukha ko. Dumiretso ako sa klase at nanatiling nakasunod si Maggie.

"Hindi ka talaga pupunta? Pwede namang magrelax paminsan-minsan. You don't have to be studious all the time. Wala ka namang dapat alalahanin sa grades mo dahil matataas naman ang mga iyon." Maggie was actually a

very consistent and energetic friend. Subalit umaabot na siya ngayon sa lebel ng pagiging makulit. Ano ba'ng meron sa Christmas ball at grabe ang kagustuhan niyang dumalo. She should have met my old self and my bitch side, malamang nasaktan ko na'to!

"Your sister Autumn must be stunning this year again. Last year, siya yata ang pinakamaganda kong nakita sa ball. And you're pretty just like her!" Di pa rin bumababa ang excitement niya.

Bumuntong hininga ako at napilitang sumagot. "I am different from Autumn. Bakit ba pinipilit mo sa akin ang mga ganung bagay?" May bahid na ng iritasyon sa boses ko. Mukha namang hindi niya iyong napansin at nakangiti akong sinagot.

"Because it's going to be on a weekend!" Yeah, the 15th. Hindi na lang ako kumibo at ipinagdasal ko na lang na pumasok na ang teacher namin. Gladly, she did.

Subalit pagdating ng lunch ay ganoon pa rin ang itinatakbo ng usapan naming ni Maggie. Gigil kong tininidor ang Blueberry cheesecake at saka ilang beses na nginuya sa bibig ko. Nang matapos kami ay nagpaalam akong may kukunin sa locker room upang mauna na siya. And she did. Gusto ko nang takpan ang tainga ko dahil sa paksa ng mga estudyanteng nadaraanan ko. I didn't think I was going to like balls anymore. Ang huling beses na umattend ako ng ganoong pagdiriwang ay muntik ko nang ikamatay. I knew I was being paranoid about it. I just didn't think that attending a Christmas ball would be worth my time.

Agad kong binuksan ang locker ko upang kunin ang isang libro. Subalit agad akong napahakbang paatras at pinanlamigan ng katawan. Lumingun-lingon ako sa paligid ngunit halos wala nang estudyante sapagkat tapos na ang lunchtime. Ibinalik ko ang tingin sa bagay na nasa loob ng locker ko. I will never get away from it, will I?

It was a familiar black box with a red ribbon. Tulad na natanggap ko noon mula sa isang underground organization. Seeing this did not only mean bad luck. It meant death as well. Nanlalamig at nanginginig ang mga kamay na kinuha ko ang box. I prepared myself for opening it. It could have anything

inside but it could never be anything good. Tinanggal ko sa pagkakalaso ang ribbon at saka binuksa ang kahon. Tulad ng inaasahan, isang papel ang nasa loob. But this was not an ordinary paper, unlike the notes na natatanggap ko dati.

It was an invitation in a delicate paper. The words were encrypted in gold letters in a beautiful, cursive way. It looked classy and vintage but I couldn't be awed by it. Maingat na binuksan ko ang invitation wondering it a small papercut from it would kill me.

Be on your most elegant self

You are invited to

Montello High School's

Grand Christmas Ball

15 December, 2012

Now, I concluded that I definitely hate grand balls with a passion. Walang nakasulat na death threat sa invitation so I shouldn't be worried about it. But why the hell was my heart beating so abnormally? Kinuha ko ang invitation at isiningit sa librong binalak kong kunin at saka inihagis ang kahon sa pinakamalapit na trash can. Tahimik at kabado akong nagtungo sa aking klase.

I kept wondering what was going to happen in that Christmas ball in Montello. Or why the hell was I invited. Nakakatawang isa akong estudyante ng Arturia subalit ni hindi man lang ako naging interesado sa snowy white Christmas ball nito. Instead, I kept choosing its darker counterpart. Mas iniisip ko pa ngayon ang maaaring mangyari sa Montello. Of course, there would definitely something bad that was going to happen considering na ang organisasyon na iyon ang may pakana ng lahat. My conscience was telling me that I should warn those people I left there. My instinct kept telling me to do something. Subalit kung iisipin kong mabuti, mas mainam na hayaan ko na lang ito. It would be better if I was not going to be a part of it.

Mas binilisan ko ang lakad ko patungong classroom. Halos wala nang estudyante sa hallway at unti-unti ko nang nararamdaman na may nagmamasid sa akin. O baka napaparanoid lang ako. Jeez! Couldn't believe it will have this effect on me! Subalit isang napakabilis na pigura mula sa sulok ng hallway ang tumakbo sa direksyon ko at mabilis na naagaw ang librong hawak ko. It was really fast that I thought it was only a blur. Subalit tumigil ang pigura at tila walang nangyari na tumayo sa daraanan ko. She pulled the invitation from the book and opened it casually.

"Montello High Grand Christmas Ball?" May pagtatanong sa kaniyang boses nang basahin niya ang invitation.

"That's not yours. I don't think you are the type of person that will be interested in a party that you're not invited to," seryoso kong sabi. Inihanda ko ang sarili ko at naglaan ng kaunting pag-iingat. I had to remind myself that I was talking to a mafia assassin.

"Hindi naman talaga ako interesado sa isang ito. I just have to take precautionary measures," sagot ni Henrietta.

"Precautionary measures?" Ulit ko. Maybe she really knew something. She could never be in the mafia kung wala siyang alam.

"Arturia University is my territory. Kaya kailangan kong protektahan ito mula sa kaguluhan sa labas," sagot niya at saka ibinalik sa pagkakasingit sa libro ang invitation. "So are you from Montello High?" Balewalang tanong nito.

I rolled my eyes at her at saka humalukipkip. Sa tingin ko ay hindi ko na kailangang magpanggap pa sa harap niya at hindi niya rin kailangang magpanggap na walang alam. "Kailangan mo pa bang itanong iyang gayong alam mo na ang kasagutan?"

Nagkibit-balikat siya at nagbigay ng ekspresyon na tila walang ideya. "Kung gayon ay taga-Montello ka nga. Wala talaga akong anumang impormasyon tungkol sa iyo. Ang ipinagtataka ko ay kung bakit may alam ka sa Mafia Freniere. At kung bakit hanggang ngayon ay buhay ka pa," seryoso niyang pahayag. Mukhang wala talaga siyang alam tungkol sa akin.

I shouldn’t have confronted her nung nakita ko ang mafia crest tattoo sa likod niya. That way, I could still be oblivious of the mafia connections around me and I could remain ignorant and safe sa pinili kong lugar. Pero ano pa bang magagawa ko ngayon. Hindi ako sumagot. Parang ilalagay ko lang ang buhay ko sa kamay ng isang mapanganig na tao.

“O maaaring isa ka lang sa mga mapang-usisang tao na iniisip na ang pagiging gangster ay isang cool at exciting na bagay.” Unti-unting naging matalas ang kaniyang pananalita. I should be returning a rude answer subalit pinigilan ko ang sarili ko. “Well, kung sino ka man, this is one piece of advice. Don’t go there. Wala kang idea kung ano’ng nangyayari sa loob ng dati mong eskwelahan. Hindi na ito katulad ng dati. Hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit ka nakatanggap ng ganitong imbitasyon,” sabi niya sa tonong tila ikamamatay ko kung hindi ako susunod sa ‘advice’ niya. Iniabot niya sa akin ang libro. Walang sabing tinanggap ko iyon.

Akmang tatalikod na siya nang mahanap ko ang boses ko. “Hindi ko inisip na ang pagiging gangster ay cool at exciting. And I usually don’t think before I act.” Inilabas kong muli ang invitation at ipinakita sa kaniya. “You said it’s dangerous, right? But it’s just a ball. How could I not fight it with an awesome ball gown and glamorous shoes?” Wika ko at saka mabilis na naglakad palampas sa kaniya. Tinatanggap ko ang ideya na wala nga siyang alam tungkol sa akin pero hindi maatim ng ego ko na inihihilera niya ako sa mababaw at mahinang tao. There was something more in me than that.

Halos hindi ko na nabigyan ng atensyon ang aking mga klase. I was still thinking of the Christmas ball. Hell! I was not even expecting that a certain Christmas ball could ruin my mind. Well, not in the normal way girl’s do. Dahil kung normal lang akong estudyante, I might be excited to our Christmas ball. Baka iniisip ko kung ano ang dapat kong suotin na ball gown, ano’ng kulay ng sapatos ko, ano’ng aksesorya ang ipapalamuti ko sa aking katawan at sino ang aking makakapareho. But I was definitely not a normal student.

“The student council is so busy. Ni hindi ko na maihanda ang sarili ko para sa weekend,” haggard na bungad ni Autumn. I was just there, sitting on the living room, exercising my tensed fingers with the remote control of the

television. Hindi na ako magugulat kung merong biglang lumitaw sa screen at pagsabihan ako na itigil na ang paglilipat ng channel.

“Nakakahilo ang ginagawa mo, Summer,” puna ni Autumn at naupo sa tabi ko. Well, mukhang nagkatotoo ang iniisip ko kanina. Hindi nga lang sa TV nagmula kundi kay Autumn. “Nakapagdecide ka na ba kung ano ang susuotin mo sa Grand Christmas Ball sa Saturday? Royal blue always looks good on you,” wika niya. Talking about normal girls.

“And you’ll be gorgeous in rainbow colors,” mahina kong sagot.

She smiled and said, “Well, I loved rainbows. Since wala ka namang intension na mapirmi sa isang panoorin, mabuti pa ay sumama ka na lang sa akin,” at saka tumayo hawak ang kamay ko. We were both still in uniform dahil kagagaling lang naming sa school.

“At saan tayo pupunta?” Tanong ko na tila walang balak umalis sa pagkakaupo sa sofa.

“Well, we’re going to look for our ball gowns at the mall. I got ball gowns in my closet pero ayoko naman na pinaglumaan ko ang gamitin mo,” nakangiti niyang sabi. How come that she was haggard yet she could still manage to look so beautiful?

“I’m not going to the ball,” matabang kong sagot at ibinalik ang paningin ko sa telebisyon.

She frowned a little. “Pero, Summer, kailangan mong pumunta. It’s a part of being a student in Arturia,” wika niya.

“Oh, really? Kailangan kong umattend ng Christmas ball apra maging isang ganap na estudyante ng Arturia,” sarkastiko kong sabi.

“Christmas ball would be nice.” Sabay kaming lumingon ni Autumn sa pinto. Dad had just arrived from his trip with my Mom. Agad na lumapit si Autumn sa kanila at saka niyakap at hinalikan. I just stayed on the sofa. Nothing really changed here. I rarely see Dad. Lumapit sa akin si Mommy at saka ako hinalikan sa pisngi.

“We’re going to get our ball gowns for the Christmas ball,” puno ng enerhiyang wika ni Autumn. Hindi naman kababakasan ng pagtutol ang mga magulang namin. It seemed that everything she does will always be right. Our Mom touched my hair and brushed some strands behind my ear.

“You go, darling,” wika nito. I shot my sister a deadly look.

“I assure you that you will enjoy Arturia’s Christmas ball,” udyok ni Daddy. Wala na akong nagawa kundi tumayo at mauna palabas ng pinto. Nakaupo na ako sa passenger seat ng kotseng ginagamit ni Autumn nang makalabas ito ng bahay.

“Ano’ng style ang gusto mo?” Tanong niya. Hindi ako sumagot. Hindi ako nag-i-enjoy na pinag-uusapan naming ang ganitong mga pambabaeng bagay. “And who would be your date? Gusto mo bang imbitahan yung boyfriend mo? Si Jin Cast?” Tanong niya nang magsimula nang umandar ang kotse. Biruin mo, naniniwala pa rin siyang boyfriend ko si Jin?

“May sarili silang Christmas ball sa ganoon ding petsa,” sagot ko.

“Really? Gusto mo bang ipakilala kita sa kaibigan ng kakilala ko? I’ll probably be with one of Arturia’s board members,” wika niya.

“Ayoko,” sagot ko. Mukhang kahit sa panahon ng Christmas ball ay balak niya pa ring maging isang student government president. She was not really going to enjoy the night. She would just be there to make sure everything goes smoothly.

Nagkibit-balikat siya. “Well, pwede rin namang umattend mag-isa, eh,” wika niya. It seemed they already made the choice for me to go to Arturia’s Christmas ball. Maybe this was for the better. I should forget Montello High. I should get rid of the black box and the invitation. I should not think of Henrietta Arturia.

And with that Arturia’s Christmas ball, maybe I could get some date

[35] Chapter 35: Maximus Brown

Author’s Note:

To start things out, I’m really sorry. I’ve been away for far too long. Kung hindi pa ako nakaramdam ng sobrang disappointment at depression, baka naging masyado na rin akong abala para magsulat. So thankful for those readers who are patiently waiting. You badly deserved a good chapter. I hope I can give you that always. :)

So yeah. It’s Far Away of Nickelback for this chapter. Haha. I don’t know if you can find a connection in here but I just love this song and I’ve been playing it again and again and again whenever I want to check my preferences. Lols. Well, it was just recommended by that person. And that person is a jerk. Brrrrr! He’s always adding up on my depression. He is slightly my Tres. >.< Probably not… haha.

I’ve been ranting and stressing Editor MUB about me being lost and couldn’t be found. She even told me that she felt like a publishing house editor and she got a hard-headed, locking-herself-up-writer in hand. Brrrr! Really! Am I really a lot to handle? But well, thanks to her. She was always pushing me to write. I bet she wants me to be depressed for a long time so I can have time to write! Meanie! T_T

And there it is! Also, someone made a video about Summer. You can find it on the external link. Watch it. It’s cool. And thanks for those people who are showing their love for MHSG on Wattpad. I really appreciate that. For messages, comments, followers, And the million reads!!! Who could ever expect that?

And for those people who wanted to meet and talk to me, well, we’ll get to that someday… over a cup of hot chocolate. And you got to treat me pepperoni pizza! Hahaha!

Well, I’ll shut up now. –

P.S. Follow me on twitter: @sielalstreim

Depressed and lost,

Siel. :)

Chapter 35: Maximus Brown

It was the 15th of December. Saturday. And tonight was Arturia's Christmas Ball. Surprisingly, I was well-prepared. And that was thanks to my older sister. It seemed that she was having fun controlling my social life now. But if you were gonna ask me why I carnapped Autumn's car and drove it towards that dangerous nowhere, then the answer would be… I didn't know. Maybe there really was something wrong with me. Gumagawa ako ng mga desisyon nang walang magandang dahilan. At kung tatanungin ako tungkol sa pinakamasamang desisyon na nagawa ko, malamang mahirapan akong sagutin iyon. Malaking porsyento ng desisyong ginawa ko ay masama.

Natatanaw ko na ang bar na iyon mula rito. Mas binilisan ko pa ang pagpapatakbo ng sasakyan. I needed to get someone for the Christmas ball. I needed a date. And when it came to that, I definitely had preferences different from what normal girls prefer.

Katulad nung huli kong nakita ang lugar na ito, it still looked creepy. May iba't iba at weirdong sasakyan na nakaparada sa parking lot ng bar. Who knows kung ilang beses nang ginamit ang mga sasakyang iyan para kumitil ng buhay ng tao. At hindi tamang itabi ko sa mga ito ang sasakyan ni Autumn. But I still did. Ipinark ko ang sasakyan at saka bumaba. I secured Tyler's gun inside my leather jacket. Kung hindi maganda ang kalalabasan ng lahat, mas mainam nang handa ako.

Everyone turned to my direction as I opened the door. Masyadong maaga pa at maliwanag kaya hindi ganun karami ang mga parokyano sa lugar na ito. Umugong ang mahinang bulungan sa paligid. Tinapunan ko silang lahat ng masamang tingin at hinintay na lumapit sa akin at saktan ako o magbato ng patalim sa direksyon ko. Subalit walang kahit anumang naganap. I was still here, standing alive.

Inilibot ko ang paningin ko sa paligid, expecting to see that familiar face. After that, what am I gonna do, huh? Drag him to be my date to the ball? Umupo ako sa bakanteng mesa. Maaaring wala pa siya rito. But he should

be coming here. Wala siyang ibang maaaring paglipasan ng oras kundi ang lugar na ito lang.

“Oy, Miss. Hinahanap mo ba yung Freniere?” Malakas na tanong ng isang malaking lalaki mula sa mesang katapat sa akin. Sumimangot lang ako sa kanya. Bakit ko naman sasadyain ang taong iyon?

“Kung hinahanap mo yung Freniere, hindi na siya bumalik dito simula nung araw na yun,” wika ng isa pang lalaki mula sa kabilang mesa. Bakit ba iniisip ng mga taong ito na hinahanap ko ang walang modong halimaw na yun? I looked at both of them.

“Wala akong paki-alam sa taong tinutukoy niyo,” seryoso kong sabi. Tiningnan lang nila ako na tila hindi kumbinsido sa sinabi ko at saka ipinagpatuloy ang walang hanggan nilang pag-inom. Ang weird ng lugar na ito. Last time I was here, gusto akong patayin ng bawat isang narito subalit matapos gawin ng taong iyon ang nakakairitang bagay na ginawa niya, parang nagbago rin ang takbo ng utak ng mga halimaw. Who knew that I would benefit from that kiss… that torturing, painful kiss. Why the hell am I thinking about it again?!

“Munting binibini, kung hindi mo napapansin, namumula na ang iyong magkabilang pisngi.” Inangat ko ang aking paningin sa nag-mamay-ari ng pamilyar na boses. He was actually who I was looking for. Inalis niya ang kaniyang paningin mula sa akin at saka nagsimulang humakbang palayo. Mabilis akong kumilos at agad na humarang sa daraanan niya. Isa ito sa mga bagay na nakasanayan ko na— ang humarang sa daraanan ng mga nakakatakot at nakamamatay na mga halimaw.

Tiningnan niya lang ako. Ni hindi ko mabasa ang iniisip o nararamdaman niya. “M-may gusto akong hilingin sa’yo,” nauutal subalit matapang kong pahayag.

Ilang saglit niya pa akong tinitigan at saka dumiretso sa paglalakad. “Nauuhaw ako!” Malakas niyang sabi saka ako nilampasan. Napansin ko ang pagkukumahog ng mga waiter upang pagsilbihan siya. Just who the hell is this person? Walang imik na sumunod ako sa kaniya. Umupo rin ako sa mesang pinili niya. Pinagmasdan ko lang siya habang tinutungga niya ang

isang bote ng alak na una niyang nahawakan. Whoa! Monsters can really drink. I watched as he drop the empty bottle on the table and grab for another one. He drank it all within seconds.

“Sabihin mo, ano’ng kailangan mo sa isang tulad ko?” Seryoso niyang tanong.

“I… I need a date,” seryoso ko ring sagot. Mabilis din akong napalingon sa napakalaking machine gun sa katabi niyang upuan. He might suddenly finish me with that weapon because of what I’d just said. Walang emosyon niya akong tiningnan. Nanatiling ganun ang sitwasyon nang ilang segundo hanggang sa pumailanlang ang malakas niyang halakhak sa nakakatakot na paligid. Matagal ang naging pagtawa niya na naging dahilan upang lumingon sa direksyon namin ang mga tao sa paligid. Iniisip ba ng taong ito na nagbibiro ako?

“Hoy, hoy, Old Max! Sa tingin mo ba, pupunta ako dito na ang intensyon ay patawanin ka?” Bakas ang pagka-pikon kong tanong. Unti-unting humupa ang halakhak niya at di makapaniwalang tumingin sa akin.

“Kakaiba ka talaga, Binibining Leondale. Sa lahat ng bagay na posibleng isadya mo sa akin, ito na yata ang pinaka hindi ko inaasahan,” iiling-iling na sagot niya. Mas hindi na siya nakakatakot ngayon kumpara noong una ko siyang nakilala. Weird, I know, gayung wala namang nagbago sa kaniya. Naroon pa rin ang nakapangingilabot na scar sa mukha niya.

“Be my date tonight at Arturia’s Christmas Ball,” walang gatol kong sabi.

“Hindi ba mas tamang ang batang Freniere ang sinasabihan mo ng ganyang bagay?” Tanong niya.

“I don’t like that jerk. Kung pwede lang na utusan kita para paslangin ang lalaking yun ay baka ginawa ko na,” sagot ko. At mas imposibleng maging date ko ang lalaking iyon. Sumeryoso ang mukha ni Old Max. May nasabi ba akong seryosong bagay?

“Hindi ko hahayaang may masaktan muling batang Freniere,” seryoso niyang sabi. Bigla kong naalala ang reaksyon niya sa burol ni Tyler. Now, I

was wondering kung ano nga ba ang relasyon niya sa mga Freniere.

“Alam ko, alam ko! At para namang posible ang bagay na iyon.” I decided to steer the conversation away from a topic that might piss him off like planning Van’s demise. Baka mawalan pa ako ng partner sa Christmas ball, not to mention mawalan ng buhay.

“Bigyan mo ako ng mgandang dahilan kung bakit ako ang isasama mo,” iiling-iling muli niyang wika. Jeez, magandang dahilan? Oh, crap. Ni hindi ko nga alam kung bakit ko ginagawa ang bagay na ito, eh. Lumipas ang ilang minuto na wala akong sinasabi. Ilang oras na lang at magsisimula na ang Christmas ball. Kailangan ko na ring maghanda.

“Kung gayun ay nagsasayang ka lang ng panahon,” wika nito.

“Sandali! Ang totoo, hindi ko alam kung bakit nandito ako. Siguro meron nga akong dahilan na hindi lang malinaw sa akin sa ngayon pero alam kong hindi rin maganda ang dahilang yun. Kung may iba pa akong pagpipilian, malamang ang batang iyon ang isama ko sa Christmas ball. Minsan ko nang nasira ang first dance niya. Ito sana ang paraan ko upang bumawi. Pero wala na ang pagkakataong iton. Alam kong malapit ka sa kanya. Sa tingin mo ba, kung niyaya ko siya, tatanggihan niya rin ako?” I was not making sense at all. Ni hindi ko na rin alam kung ano ang punto ng mga lumalabas sa bibig ko. Subalit hindi inaasahan, mukhang isang tao ang lubos na nakauunawa sa bagay na sinabi ko. Nakita ko ang pagtamlay ng mabagsik na mga mata ni Old Max.

“Nakatutuwang malaman na naranasan pala ng Mafia Reaper na magkaroon ng unang sayaw. Ang buong akala ko ay hindi siya nagkaroon ng normal na buhay.” Bakas ang lungkot sa boses niya. Napalunok ako.

“Si Tyler… Sa tingin ko, isa siyang responsableng estudyante sa Montello High. Damn, he was a nerd. Palagi ko siyang kasabay kumain sa cafeteria. Sa pagkakaalam ko nga ay naranasan pa niyang ma-bully pero ni hindi man lang siya nanakit ng estudyante. Sinabi niya sa akin na idol niya ako. Isa siyang mabuting kaibigan. Ngayon, kung hindi iyon matatawag na normal na buhay para sa’yo…” Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko. May bumabara na sa aking lalamunan at umiinit na rin ang aking mga mata.

“Binibining Leondale, maaari mo pa ba akong kwentuhan tungkol sa Mafia reaper?” Tanong niya. Tumango ako subalit hindi ako nagsalita upang magkwento. Hindi pa rin pala madali sa akin ang lahat.

“Pasensya na.” Tumungo ako at saka kinagat ang labi ko. I shouldn’t cry. Naramdaman ko ang palad niya sa balikat ko.

“Natitiyak ko na hindi bagay ang suot ko sa pupuntahan natin. Magiging kumportable ba ang kaibigan ko sa iyong sasakayan?” Tukoy niya sa malaking machine gun.

Ngumiti ako. Maitatago ko nga yun sa sasakyan ni Autumn.

I bought a big coat for Max. That style from Detective Penber. Bumagay naman iyon kay Old Max. Kakatwa lang ang pagiging sobrang tangkad niya at sobrang laki ng pangangatawan. Para ko tuloy binuhay ang monster sa Frankenstein. As for me, I was wearing a cream-colored dress that was patterned from Victorian style ball gowns. It showed my bare neck and shoulders. It was satin and had delicate stones attached into it. I also had a cream-colored arm warmer and a pearl necklace. I pulled my hair up and wore a white-colored, heeled shoes. God. Pakiramdam ko ay ako yung tipong pwedeng i-alay ng mga kulto. What’s with Autumn’s taste in gowns?

“Mukha kang prinsesa, binibining Leondale,” puna ni Old Max.

“Oh yeah, and you are my kidnapper,” pikon kong sagot. Mukha namang naintindihan niya na hindi ako natutuwa sa suot ko. Ngumiti lang siya at nagpatuloy sa pagmamaneho tungo sa Arturia.

And as I expected, we got attention. Not just mere attention but it was like there was not Christmas ball happening around us and it was only me and Old Max. But I didn’t care. At mukha namang wala ring paki-alam sa paligid si Old Max.

“Summer.” Lumingon ako and I saw Autumn walking towards us. She was smiling. She was indeed the most beautiful. I rolled my eyes. Now, the three of us would even be attracting more attention. “Good evening. So you’re my sister’s date?” Tanong niya kay Old Max.

“Ako nga, Binibini,” magalang na sagot ni Old Max.

Ngumiti si Autumn. “Welcome to Arturia, sir. Kayo na po ang bahala sa kapatid ko. Kailangan ko lang pong siguraduhin na nasa maayos ang lahat ngayong gabi,” wika ni Autumn at saka umalis. She could have just stayed on organizing this stuff without having to come to me.

“Napakaliwanag ng lugar na ito, Binibining Leondale,” naisatinig ni Old Max nang maupo kami sa isa sa mga mesa. Got to agree. Ito nga ang White Christmas Ball ng Arturia. Everything was white. Meron ding fake snow sa buong paligid. May sumasayaw na rin sa dance floor. May mga maliliit na snow fairies din bilang decoration. It was a party for good girls, I guess.

“Hindi rin ako kumportable,” sang-ayon ko sa kanya. I sipped on my wine. Tiningnang mabuti ni Max ang laman ng manipis na kopita sa kaniyang kamay. Tila hindi siya makapaniwala na ganito lang ang isisilbi sa kanya. Well, he should be content with that. Ilang bote na rin naman ang pinatumba niya kanina. Pinanuod namin ang mga tao sa paligid. Ramdam ko rin ang pagtapon nila ng tingin sa direksyon namin. Well, that was the reason why I chose Old Max compared to their clean and well-bred partners: to rebel.

Maybe that big part of me was screaming contradiction. I didn’t speak in arguments but I show it through ridiculous stunts.

Napansin ko ang pagbabago ng paligid at reaksyon ng mga estudyante ng isang pareha ang bumungad sa bulwagan. It was Henrietta Arturia. She definitely looked beautiful with her silver gown. Mararamdaman rin ang lakas ng dating niya habang naglalakad papasok ng gymnasium. Naglalakad siya nang tila walang paki-alam sa nangyayari sa paligid niya. Parang walang existance ang mga tao para sa kaniya. Subalit nag-iba iyon nang dumako ang paningin niya sa direksyon namin ni Old Max.

Halos pareho ang naging reaksyon namin nang mapagsino ko ang kasama niyang dumating. I couldn’t breathe. It felt like death was looming over me. It was here on Arturia’s Christmas Ball. Sebastian Freniere. The death personified.

“Kakaiba talaga ang araw na ito,” wika ni Old Max nang mapansin niya ang mga taong tinitingnan ko. Tila may binulong si Henrietta kay Tres at saka sabay silang naglakad tungo sa direksyon ko. Oh, crap. This wasn’t part of the plan. Well, did I really have a plan?

“M-mukhang hindi maganda ang susunod na mangyayari,” mahina kong sabi. But I was saying this to myself more than to Old Max.

“Kakaiba ka talaga, Binibining Leondale,” tanging komento nito.

I held my breath hanggang sa makarating ang dalawa sa mesa namin. Tumalim ang tingin ni Tres nang masiguro niya kung sino ako. Well, I almost didn’t recognize myself when I looked at the mirror wearing this fancy gown.

“Kung gayon, dito mo pala piniling magtago,” nagtatagis ang mga bagang na wika ni Tres.

“Dito ako nag-transfer,” patama ko sa kaniya. Hindi ko nagustuhan ang ginamit niyang termino. I wasn’t hiding!

Tumalim lalo ang mukha niya. Kung nag-iba lang ang sitwasyon, malamang agad na niya akong napaslang. Hindi ko pa rin nakakalimutan na yun ang gusto niyang gawin mula nung huli kaming magkita. Subalit nasa Christmas ball kami at maraming tao sa paligid. At bukod sa lahat ng atensyon ay nasa amin, kasama ko rin si Old Max. He really must be someone to earn this kind of respect from Tres.

Tila hindi naman ako nag-e-exist para kay Henrietta, and there was only one person she can see.

“Maximus Brown,” wika niya. Para siyang bata na nakakita ng superhero na iniidolo niya. I rolled my eyes. What was with this Old Man? Maski si Henrietta ay nagkakaganito. But for me, he was just an old, big person who owns a machine gun.

“Ako nga iyon, Binibini,” sagot ni Old Max. Tila iyon isang hudyat upang agad na umupo si Henrietta sa katabing upuan ni Old Max. Tres sat beside

her which made him sit next to me. Sweet.

“I never thought I would have a chance to meet you,” mahina at halos pabulong na wika ni Henrietta habang tumitingin sa paligid. Tila sinisiguro niya na walang ibang makakarinig. “Maybe we can look for a better place to talk.”

I panicked. Si Old Max lang ang dahilan kung bakit hindi pa ako pinapatay ni Tres ngayon. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me but he’s my date,” wika ko. Saka lang ako nilingon ni Henrietta at mukhang hindi siya makapaniwala na naroon ako.

“The new girl?! How did you bring him here? How did you find him?” Nagtatakang tanong niya.

“Pinuntahan ako ni Binibining Leondale sa Clover’s Club,” si Old Max ang sumagot.

“Clover’s Club? She managed to get out from that place alive?” She seemed so shocked. So she knew that pub.

“Well, I’m here which means, yeah. I managed to get out of there alive. And have I told you that I’ve been in there twice?” Sarkastiko kong komento. I couldn’t name it but getting Henrietta to pay attention to me boosted my pride. I know na hindi naman ako kulang sa pansin pero ilang beses na ba akong tinuturing ni Henrietta na parang wala akong kwenta? I guess being noticed by a Mafia reaper was different after all.

“So, you know her, too, Tres?” Pagkukumpirma niya. I stiffened. Of course, Tres knew me. He was my predator. The Frenieres were my predator and they were simply sure of their prey.

“Oh, I know people. Especially those who are near their end.” He gave me that threatening, evil smirk. I felt the chill. He was still angry and he still wanted me dead. Like his brother.

“Sebastian,” babala ni Old Max. Medyo nakahinga ako ng maluwag. Not totally dahil napapalibutan ako ng mga delikadong tao. How did I get

myself into this kind of situation again? Matalim ang tingin na itinapon ni Tres kay Max at saka kuyom ang kamaong ininom ang laman ng hawak niyang kopita.

“Pwede ko bang itanong kung bakit kasama mo ang isang Maximus Brown?” Biglang tanong ni Henrietta. Nilingon ko si Old Max. Tila wala naman itong balak na sumagot.

“Uhm… dahil siya ang gusto kong ka-date? Kailangan ko ng date for the Christmas ball,” sagot ko. Ano nga ba ang dapat kong sagot? Mukhang hindi naman siya kumbinsido.

“Sabihin mo nga sa akin. Wala ka bang ideya kung sino ang kasama mo ngayon?” Mas naging seryoso si Henrietta. Idea? Pilit akong kumuha ng kahit anong bagay na nalalaman ko tungkol kay Maximus Brown sa utak ko. Well, he was Old Max for me. I just knew him somewhere because of Tyler. And he also stopped Tres from killing me. He was not ordinary, that’s all I knew.

“Isa lang siyang matanda na obsessed sa isang napakalaking machine gun,” seryoso kong sabi. Nararamdaman ko na naman ang bagay na laging ipinamumukha sa akin ni Henrietta. She really thinks I was just a naive girl who wanted to be in the mafia. Nagulat ako nang marahas na hinaklit ni Henrietta ang braso ko. The wine almost spilled from the glass. Of course she was strong.

“You don’t say that to a respectful hunter!” Nagtatagis ang mga bagang na wika ni Henrietta. I pulled my arm back and she let it go. Now, she was showing emotions.

“You’re a bitch.” Napatingin sa amin ang ilang taong nasa malapit lang. I knew na malakas ang boses ko and I just called Arturia’s goddess a bitch. Mukha namang walang pakialam si Tres. “Did you say hunter?” I asked then looked at Old Max.

“Yes, hunter.” Mas hininaan ni Henrietta ang boses niya. “At matagal nang nakalipas simula nang huli siyang magpakita. Akala ko sa kwento at pictures ko lang makikilala ang hunter. And then you… Who are you to be

the one to bring him here? And you even treat him like his reputation is nothing!" Naroroon ang pagbabanta sa boses niya. Kakaiba talaga ang mga taong nasa Mafia. They had a twisted sense of pride and honor. Ang walang emosyong si Henrietta ay nasaktan ang pride dahil kilala ng isang katulad ko ang hunter.

"I don't think na kailangan ko ring hangaan ang iniidolo mo." I looked straight into her eyes. I didn't show that I was threatened by her even though she was a reaper.

Inilipat niya ang tingin niya kay Old Max. "We can finish her but it should be outside Arturia. Ito ang teritoryong pinangangalagaan ko," mahina niyang sabi.

Dahan-dahang umiling si Old MAX. "Ang mga bata ngayon. Parang nawala na ang dignidad ng isang tagatapos ng buhay," sagot niya.

I rolled my eyes. They were so weird. They think there was dignity in killing people? I failed to see the logic there. Pero hindi sumagot si Henrietta na parang nasermunan ng magulang. Dumilim naman ang mukha ni Tres. Mukhang sineryoso ng dalawang ito ang sinabi ni Old Max. Wait, don't tell me they also believe what he said?! Absurd.

Ilang minuto kaming nanatiling tahimik at pinanuod ang nagsasayaw sa dance floor. It really felt like I'm on a snow white world. But there was a part of my mind screaming that I don't belong here.

"Tres, can you dance with this girl for a while? I just need to talk with the hunter," seryosong sabi ni Henrietta. Naroon pa rin sa tinig niya ang respeto kahit na tinawag lang niyang Tres ang malamang ay amo niya.

I was about to say my disapproval nang haklitin ni Tres ang braso ko at marahas akong itinayo. Lumingon ako kay Old Max habang kinakaladkad ako ni Tres patungo sa dance floor. Nag-uusap na sila ni Henrietta at wala na ang atensyon sa akin. "Damn that bitch!" Now I was sure I was dead.

Tres snaked his arm around my waist and put my arm around his neck. We were so close and I couldn't breathe. Like I was suffocating to death. Hindi

ko alam kung makakatulong ba na tinitingnan kami ng maraming tao. The scene would definitely look like a fragile, weak and white princess dancing with a deadly prince. A lame tragic scene.

“So, we’re dancing again. Looks familiar. You’re still pretty. But I would like to dance with your cold corpse instead,” mahina niyang sabi malapit sa aking tainga. I gritted my teeth.

“If you are going to kill me…”

“No, I won’t. Not now. Not here. Not when a hunter is trying to stop me. Ibang klase ka rin talaga, no? Dati ang kapatid ko, ngayon naman ay si Max. I don’t understand why they don’t want you dead.” Nagtatagis ang mga bagang niyang sabi. Alam kong nanggigigil na siya.

“Sebastian, I…” Ang higpit ng pagkakakapit niya. Halos naiipit na ang dugo at hangin na dumadaloy sa katawan ko.

“What? Is it painful? But I’m really enjoying it. I think I could crush your body with just my hand.” He smirked. He was determined to kill me but since he can’t, he would just hurt me in every way he can. Inipon ko ang buong lakas at itinulak siya palayo subalit talo pa niya ang pader sa tibay. Napansin ko ang pagtigil ng tao sa paligid. Pinili na nilang manood sa amin. Crap!

Isang kamay ang tumapik kay Tres. It was Henrietta. He let go of me. I stepped back and grasped for air. Nameywang lang si Sebastian at pinanuod ako sa paghahabol ng aking hininga. “Jerk!” Galit kong sabi.

“So you are from Montello High,” narinig kong sabi ni Henrietta. I turned pale. Naramdaman ko ang reaksyon na pagkagulat ng mga tao sa paligid. Oh, really. Shit happens. I remember that Montello got the worst reputation in this place. Not telling I was from there made me scrape by. Napipikon na ako sa mga nangyayari. Hell! These people were so judgmental! I should take off my mask, I guess.

Sinalubong ko ang nanunuri niyang tingin. “What of it?!” Matatag kong sagot. Mas lumakas ang bulung-bulungan. Nakita kong pagak na tumawa si

Tres.

“This is interesting,” aniya.

Lumapit sa akin si Henrietta. And in my face, she said, “Tell me, do you really belong here?”

I stiffened. Ginulo nito ang utak at emosyon ko. Who the hell was I kidding? Of course, I didn’t belong here. I didn’t belong anywhere. I only had that one place that would suit me. It was asking me to come back. It had been in my mind for a while now. There was something wrong with it and I need to help. Hindi na ako nag-aksaya pa ng panahon. I looked at Henrietta.

“No, I don’t.”

Tinalikuran ko siya. Tinalikuran ko ang lahat. Tinalikuran ko ang Arturia. This wasn’t my Christmas ball. With or without a date, this wasn’t my place. I would go back there. I would go back to the darkness. And I bet it would always welcome me.

[36] Chapter 36: Blank Stares

Chapter 36: Blank Stares

I didn’t really intend to drag Autumn’s car into this but it seemed like I had no choice. Nothing could really stop a moment of realization. That was why I was driving full speed towards that place. The only place where I think I can only fit in. Montello High.

Nang matanaw ko ito ay naisip ko ang posibilidad na naging mas misteryoso pa ito kumpara dati. Muling bumalik ang mga narinig ko tungkol sa Montello High nitong nakaraang mga araw. Walang nakakaalam kung anong tunay na nangyayari sa loob nito. It seemed like it was under some sort of lock down. So why did I receive such invitation? I was from the outside. Could this be a trap? That black box! Hindi ko alam kung isa lang talaga iyong simpleng imbitasyon mula sa eskwelahan o mas higit ba. Posible bang hindi tumigil ang organisasyon na iyon sa paghabol sa buhay

ko? Now, I was wondering if this one was a good decision or just an “out of the rush moment.” Isa na naman sa mga bagay na hindi ko pinag-isipan.

I stopped at the gates of Montello High. It was closed Two guards were standing on post and they just looked at me. Bumaba ako sa kotse at lumapit sa kanila.

“Excuse me. I got an invitation but I forgot to bring it,” wika ko. They just looked at me. This was crap. Mukhang hindi nila ako papapasukin. “I’m Summer Leondale,” dagdag ko. It took only a short moment bago nila pinindot ang buton na nagbubukas ng gate. Bumalik ako sa kotse at saka iyong pinaandar at ipinasok sa Montello High. I was back at this place though the guards were a little strange. Ano’ng problema nila? Jeez!

I parked the car sa harap ng gymnasium. Malamang ditto nila ginagawa ang Christmas ball. It was decorated with black ribbons and drapes. There were also red roses and few black ones. I inspected the black roses-it was real. Where did they get this?

Pumasok ako sa loob. Everything looked like they were in order. Everyone was in black ball gown and tuxedo. Some of them were dancing on the dance floor. I was the only one in cream colored ball gown. My dress looked out of place. Para akong ilaw sa dilim.

Nakapangingilabot ang sunod na nangyari. Lahat ay lumingon sa entrance at ipinako ang tingin sa akin. Kahit ang mga magkakaparehang sumasayaw ay nasa akin ang mata. And the way they synchronized their looks-there was a creepy feeling to it. Pareho ang reaksyon ng mga taong ito sa dalawang gwardiya kanina. Same blank faces. Same blank eyes. No light of recognition. I suddenly got a sense of dĂŠjĂ vu. I felt like I’ve seen these expressions before. I only hoped I was wrong.

Nanatiling ganun ang senaryo nang ilang segundo bago sila bumalik sa mga ginagawa nila bago ako dumating. Dancing, driking, the stuff people do on balls. But then there was a strange quality to them. Almost creepy, like a horror film. What’s with these people? Even though I couldn’t place it, there was only one thing I was sure of: there was something wrong with them.

Someone grabbed my waist and walked me swiftly to the dance floor. My defense quickly kicked in and I curled my fist into a hard ball, ready to give this threat a punch. Natigilan ako nang magsalita ito.

“What the hell?! I’ve been wanting to see you but why the f ck did you come back?” Pabulong nitong sabi habang iginigiya ako sa pagsayaw.

“Jin?” Gulat kong sabi. Nakaramdam ako ng pagkalma nang makakita ng pamilyar na mukha.

“Who else?! You know I’d grab any chance just to dance with you again,” nagbibiro ang boses niya but I wasn’t fooled. There was something serious and hard in Jin’s eyes. To my relief, he didn’t have a blank stare. His dark brown orb were alight with life. He’s not one of them.

“Jin, something is wrong,” mahina kong sabi habang sumasayaw. Natatakot ako sa naiisip kong hinala.

“Of course something is wrong! You left without saying a word! How in the hell would you think things will be alright?” Seryoso niyang sagot na may bahid ng galit. Ano bang problema niya? Unless siya ang guardian ko, malamang kailangan ko ngang magpaalam. But he was just my-uh, yeah-fake boyfriend. “And now, you are crashing a party-”

“Jin! I wasn’t gate-crashing,” putol ko sa kaniya.

“What?!” He looked confused and shocked.

“I was invited,” sagot ko.

Tiningnan niya ako na tila hindi siya makapaniwala. Mukhang tuluyan na rin siyang nagalit. He brushed his hand through his long hair. “Come with me,” bigla niyang sabi at mahigpit ang hawak sa pulso kong hinila ako palayo sa dance floor.

“Hey, Jin. Isn’t that Summer Leondale?” Tanong ng isa sa mga nakasalubong namin na base sa pagkakaalala ko ay miyembro ng Dark Monarch. Hawak niya sa kaniyang bisig ang isang babae na halos lumuwa

ang dibdib sa seductive black gown na suot. What the hell? Kelan pa pinayagan sa Montello ang ganiyang damit?

“Yes. She’s my girlfriend,” sagot ni Jin at saka nagmamadali naming ipinagpatuloy ang paglalakad hanggang sa makarating kami sa Boy’s Comfort Room. He dragged me inside. I panicked. Pilit kong binawi ang wrist ko subalit nanaig ang lakas niya. I blushed when I saw a half naked girl with a boy who was busy kissing her.

“Hey, dude. I have a bad news. You have to leave this area now because we don’t want to share.” Malakas at puno ng awtoridad ang tinig ni Jin, one that I had never seen him do before. But then I realized that this guy was the second leader of one of Montello High’s gangster groups. This was ‘gangster Jin’ in action. I blushed even more nang tumingin sa amin ang dalawa at narecognize kung sino kami. Dali-dali silang nag-ayos ng sarili at saka lumabas ng comfort room. Jin locked the door immediately after making sure na dalawa na lang kami sa loob.

“Hoy, ikaw! Ano sa tingin mo ang ginagawa mo?!” Nagtataka at may bahid ng iritasyon kong tanong.

Bumaling siya sa akin. I could see the bothered look on his face. “You shouldn’t have come back,” seryoso niyang wika. I frowned. Hindi ganito ang reaksyon na inaasahan ko mula kay Jin Cast.

“So, I don’t deserve a ‘welcome back,’ huh? Even from you?” Sarkastiko kong sabi.

“Hindi mo naiintindihan, Summer. I wanted to see you. I wanted to be with you. Damn it! Hindi mo ba alam ang naramdaman ko nang nalaman kong umalis ka ng Montello High? Ng walang paalam? But now I just think that you probably made the right decision,” seryoso pa rin ang ekspresyon niya.

Who the hell was this guy? This wasn’t the Jin Cast I was used to. No easy banter. No lame flirting. “Jin Cast, you are such a freak!” Inis kong sabi.

He drastically ran his fingers through his hair. He looked even more frustrated now. “Everything has changed. This thing we are dealing with

that we don’t know anything about, it’s too dangerous. Montello High is not safe anymore.” There was a grave tone in his voice. Kahit ako ay pinanlamigan sa sinabi niya subalit bago pa man ako nagtungo rito ay sumagi na sa utak ko ang posibilidad na hindi magiging maayos ang lahat.

“Jin, Montello had never been safe. Hindi ako bumalik dahil lang sa gusto kong maging ligtas,” mahinahon kong sabi.

“You saw what happened to Tyler! You almost got killed! Mas gugustuhin ko pang hindi ka na lang makita o makasama kaysa mapahamak ka rito. This is just a trap, Summer. If you were invited to this freaking ball, then this is just a trap. Hindi mo man lang ba naisip yun?” Frustrated niyang sabi. I frowned. Ang huli kong naaalala, wala siyang alam sa mga nangyayari sa Montello High, sa organisasyon at sa Mafia. I grabbed his shoulders to focus him.

“You seem to know something,” I said sharply.

He managed a weak smile. “But not as much as you already know,” sagot niya.

Fear suddenly pierced into me. This was bad. I never expected things to turn out this way. Alam kong curious siya but I never thought he’d drag himself into the middle of these things. This freaking Jin Cast! “Ano’ng nalalaman mo?”

“I’ve always suspected something was up, Summer. And I was right. You should have told me all these things before instead of keeping all these deadly mess to yourself!”

I gritted my teeth in frustration. “And what? Get you into the middle of this? Get you killed? Kung nalaman mo ang mga ito noon pa lang, malamang hindi ka na umabot sa araw na ito,” inis kong sabi. Jeez. Hindi niya kailangang madamay dito!

“Ipinagmamalaki mo ba na hanggang ngayon ay buhay ka pa?“Sarkastiko niyang tanong. Hindi ko nagustuhan ang tono niya. What the hell was he thinking?! Na natutuwa ako sa mga nangyayari sa akin?

“Iniisip mo bang gusto ko ang lahat?” Galit kong tanong.

“I was thinking that you’re enjoying being protected by Van Freniere way too much!” Sagot niya. Napailing ako sa frustration. Paano naman nasama ang taong yun dito? Ibang klase talaga ang takbo ng utak niya.

“I would never ask for his protection!” Um-echo ang boses ko sa buong comfort room. I didn’t realize that I already raised my voice.

“You never have to!” Kontrolado pa rin ang boses niya.

Inis ko siyang tinalikuran at nagtungo sa pinakamalapit na sink. I angrily looked at myself through the mirror while screaming, ‘Calm down!’ inside my head. Kapag nagpatuloy pa ito, I swear I was going to explode. Medyo matagal ko ring tiniis na kontrolin ang emosyon ko sa Arturia.

Nahagip ng paningin ko sa salamin ang pagkabahala sa mukha ni Jin. He brushed his hand through his hair again. He had been doing that a lot.

“Look, I’m sorry,” bigla niyang sabi. Hindi ako sumagot. I just stared at him through the mirror. “I just want you to be safe,” dagdag niya.

Huminga ako ng malalim, pushing all the anger back. “Saan mo nalaman ang lahat?” Tanong ko. Hindi siya agad sumagot. It took him a while bago nakapagdecide na sabihin sa akin.

“Detective Penber explained everything to me.”

I gritted my teeth and balled my fists. “What the freaking hell?! That walking boots-and-cape!” Inis kong bulalas. I should see him. The hell! We need to talk! No, not just talk.

“Speaking of detective, I need to talk to him. May kailangan kaming pag-usapan.” I rolled my eyes. I stopped myself from actually commeting, “Me, too.” “But they are not letting us out. They are not even letting people in.” Frustrated niyang dagdag. I frowned. Something was really wrong.

“But they let me in.” I focused on him. I felt the coldness as I reached to a realization. Yeah. There must be a reason. I must be on a death trap, after

all.

“And I have to get you out,” sagot niya. Get me out. Help me escape. But that was not part of my plan.

“Meron na bang bagong nag-o-occupy ng space ko sa dorm?” Sa halip ay tanong ko sa kaniya. Kunot-noo niya akong tinitigan.

“You’re staying?” Hindi makapaniwalang tanong niya.

“Yes.”

“But, Summer-”

“It’s the only choice I have,” buo ang boses kong putol sa kaniya. I didn’t have any doubts this time. Lumipas ang ilang sandal bago siya tumatangu-tango, a conflicted expression crossing his features. Ako na lang yata lagi ang dahilan ng pagpapakita ng vulnerability ng isang gangster na Jin Cast.

“I just want you to know, I’m not happy about this. Pero sige.” He offered his hand to me. Saka ko lang napagtuunan ng pansin ang hitsura niya sa gabing ito. He actually looked really gorgeous on his dark gray suit which was a long shot from the all black wardrobe. Meanwhile, I looked like a princess just like what Max said. A stupid one, though. Inabot ko sa kaniya ang isa kong kamay at saka kami sabay na lumabas. I was walking into another hopeless hole. But that certainly didn’t feel like it as I think of Jin’s support.

Some people saw us and I could hear them whispering. Gusto kong tumigil at itaktak sa sahig ang mga malamang na malisyosong laman ng utak nila. I missed this. I missed being a bad girl. Well, not so bad I guess. Nawala na sa mga estudyante ang mga pares ng blangkong mga mata. All that was left was curiosity.

Tahimik ang Girl’s Dormitory nang marating namin. Malamang na karamihan sa mga ito ay nasa Christmas ball.

“Let’s go!” Wika ni Jin at hinila ako papasok. Jeez, of all the things that I missed, being dragged was not one of those.

“Hoy, ikaw! Bawal ‘tong ginagawa natin! We should inform the faculty first that I’m back,” protesta ko habang nagmamadali kami papasok.

“Sa tingin mo ba nag-e-exist pa ang rules sa Montello High? Nakita mo naman yung suot nung isa kanina, diba?” Nakangiti lang niyang sabi at saka kami umakyat ng hagdan. Wala man lang kaming nakasalubong hanggang sa makarating kami sa dati kong kwarto. It was locked. Subalit mukhang bihasa na rin sa trespassing itong si Jin dahil nagawa niya iyong buksan gamit ang kaniyang student I.D.

“Impressive,” komento ko nang marinig ang click ng door knob.

“I can always impress you, sweetheart,” nakangiti niyang sabi. I rolled my eyes and opened the door. Huminga ako ng malalim nang makapasok ako sa kwarto. I missed this place. Monsters were always trespassing here.

Isinara ni Jin ang pinto at saka umupo sa dati kong kama. Covers and pillows were still clean. I wondered if they maintained this for the new ones who would arrive. Binuksan ko ang closet ko. It was empty except for some books. Oh, maybe I still have some of my things left. But crap! I didn’t have any underwear or anything at all, except for this ball gown. Alangan namang suotin ko ito everyday.

“Uh! How am I going to survive?” Bulong ko. Dumako ang paningin ko sa closet ni Jamie. Of course. She must have tons of clothes. Maybe I could borrow some-damn! Signature and fashionable clothes. They didn’t look all that comfortable.

“I could bring some of my fitted shirts if you want,” suhestiyon ni Jin.

“Hindi ka ba babalik sa Christmas ball?” Tanong ko.

Umiling siya. “It’s almost midnight. Malamang ay matatapos na rin iyon. At isa pa, ang tanging taong gusto kong makasama ay nandito. So I think I

should just stay here," walang gatol niyang sagot. I rolled my eyes at him. What did I expect? Wala talagang kupas si Jin.

"Oh, really? Sorry to break your heart. I actually came from Arturia's ball and I already have a date," wika ko. Naalala ko si Old Max. Sa sobrang inis at hindi pag-iisip ko kanina, nagawa kong iwanan siya sa Arturia. I hoped that witch would entertain him.

"And who was that weakling?" Nakataas ang kilay na tanong ni Jin. I smirked at him. Weakling, huh.

"You'll meet him… someday, maybe," sagot ko.

I managed to find a simple shirt and a mini shorts from Jamie's clothes. I hoped she wouldn't mind. But of course she would. After nang huli naming pagkikita, malamang kahit rentahan ko ang damit na ito, hindi siya papayag. So I resorted to stealing it. Well, it wasn't like I had a choice here.

Jin was scanning my "Frankenstein" book while I went to the bathroom to change out of this ridiculous dress. I neatly folded my gown afterwards. Kailangan ko pa itong maibalik kay Autumn. Malaman na hindi ko na ito gamitin pa at saka mas babagay ito sa kaniya. Dahil nagwind down na ang reunion namin ng fake boyfriend ko, bumalik sa isip ko ang mga mata ng mga estudyanteng nadatnan ko sa ball.

Blank eyes. I saw it before. I saw it when Tres and his men were jeopardized in that transaction. I saw it when I was captured. I saw it in Mirden. I saw myself because I had tried it in me. Kung tama ang hinala ko, everything was definitely taking a turn for the worst now. Everything was going down. And crap! Here I was, thinking of impossible ways to save everything.

Napalingon ako sa may pinto nang makarinig ako ng mga yabag ng sapatos. Pinanuod lang namin ni Jin ang pagbukas ng pinto at ang nagmamadaling pagpasok nila Jamie at Mirden. They stopped on their tracks nang ma-realize nila ang sitwasyon. Natuon ang paningin nila sa akin.

“Summer?” Sabay nilang usal. I bit my lips. I had no idea what the hell I was gonna tell them.

“Uhm, hi,” and in the end, I managed to say that. Jin chuckled at my only response. Masamang tingin ang ibinato ko sa kaniya.

The three of us stared at each other. We stayed like that for long seconds hanggang sa si Mirden ang unang lumapit sa akin at niyakap ako. “Oh my God, Summer!” Hysterical niyang sambit. May bahid ng pag-aalala ang boses niya. Nanatili lang na nakatayo at nakatingin sa amin si Jamie. I inhaled deeply.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I was-” Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko dahil agad siyang lumapit sa akin at niyakap ako. What the hell!

“We missed you. I’m sorry, too.” Halos umiyak na wika ni Jamie.

“C-can’t breathe-” Ang tangi kong naisagot.

Tumatawang lumapit si Jin at humiwalay sina Jamie at Mirden sa akin. “Hey, girls. You are choking my girlfriend,” nakangiti niyang sabi. This freaking moron!

“Can’t you just leave, Jin?” Baling ko sa kaniya.

Muli akong hinawakan ni Mirden sa balikat. “Summer, you shouldn’t have come back,” wika ni Mirden. Of course, if I can remember the signs, it meant she knew this too. “They plan to take over the whole Montello High. Ang Christmas Ball na ito… hindi ito isang ordinaryong Christmas ball.”

Tila lumamig ang paligid sa narinig ko.

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?” Kunot-noong tanong ko.

“This is a launch. It’s an experiment. Lahat ng nasa party kanina… they were the test subjects,” wika niya. Napaawang ang bibig ko sa sinabi niya. So I was right. This was it. The blank eyes. Frankensteins.

“Paano mo nalaman ‘to?” Tanong ko.

“I know the signs, Summer. I was a test subject. That and we’re secretly investigating. Sumusunod kami sa instructions ni Detective Patrick bago tuluyang nawalan ng koneksyon ang Montello sa labas,” sagot ni Mirden. Nagkibit-balikat lang si Jin. Pero mas lalo akong nanghina sa sunod kong narinig.

“At base sa pangyayari, you are their awaited guest…”

I gritted my teeth. Seriously, Montello High never failed to give me the most awesome bloody welcome party. So here goes, my near end.

“At ngayon, kailangan mo nang umalis, Summer. They must already know you are here. Alam mo namang ikaw ang paborito nilang test subject,” dagdag ni Mirden. Sa aming apat, si Mirden ang mas nakakaunawa kung gaano kadelikado ang sitwasyon.

“I-I just came back. Tinataboy niyo na agad ako?” Nakuha kong biro. I know it was lame. They didn’t even fake a laugh.

“She won’t listen,” tahimik na komento ni Jin.

“Of course, she won’t,” sang-ayon ni Jamie. I frowned. I was here and I hear them. Jeez! Ano’ng problema nila? Or better yet, baka nasa akin ang problema. But I have made up my mind about this.

“Maybe this is friendship,” I said. Tila nagbagsak ako ng isang bag ng gummy worms sa sahig at lahat sila ay napatulala sa akin. It was like they just discovered I was an alien because I spoke in an alien language. Nagpatuloy ako sa pagsasalita nang hindi sila sumagot.

“Well, yeah. This must be friendship. I trespassed into your rooms even though it was locked. I wore your clothes without your permission. I refused to go even if you are pushing me out. You keep talking about me like I couldn’t hear you. Horrible, isn’t it?”

They suddenly smiled at my sarcasm. “Terribly horrible,” sang-ayon ni Mirden.

“Yeah, you stole my clothes,” wika ni Jamie.

Lumapit si Jin at saka ako inakbayan. Malakas ko siyang siniko sa tagiliran, dahilan upang bawiin ang kamay niya. “Oh, shit. Love hurts,” wika niya. Masamang tingin ang muli kong ibinigay sa kaniya.

“Sa tingin ko, kailangan na nating magplano. Delikado ang ginagawa natin. The mere thought the meron kayong alam sa nangyayari ay masyado nang delikado. We have to be careful,” seryoso kong sabi. Now, I feel like I was leading an army into a dangerous mission.

“Then we have to pretend that we don’t know anything,” wika ni Mirden. That would be a good strategy. Oh, no. Maybe I was really starting to think before I act now. And thinking before making a move was pretty hard. Ah. We spent a few more hours drawing plans bago namin napagdesisyunang itaboy si Jin mula sa kwarto.

“Guess I have to protect you then.” He winked at me before he disappeared from the door. He was gallant and believe it or not, I appreciate it. But protecting me will be a bad idea. I hoped he won’t.

[37] Chapter 37: For Those Who Were Left Behind

Author’s Note:

Our soundtrack for this chapter: Come Home by One Republic.

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Chapter 37: For Those Who Were Left Behind

Thinking would really be oppressive if you have no idea what was waiting ahead of you. I should have known about this. Maybe I should just not think at all… But, maybe not. A plan would be crucial for this situation. It was just that this move I was making was not part of the plan. But it was inevitable.

Tatlong katok ang ginawa ko sa Principal's office. Hindi ko alam kung may idea na ang faculty sa pagbabalik ko. Subalit sa tingin ko, ito ang tamang gawin bago ako mag-crash sa mga dati kong klase. The hell with the right thing! Maybe I somehow got this from staying at Arturia. Kung ikukumpara ko ang mga estudyante ng Montello High at Arturia, siguradong malaki ang pagkakaiba. Arturia students were always thinking. Palagi silang nakatambay sa library. They measure a person by their ability to think. Montello High, on the other hand, would look up to you if you were strong. Hindi sila tumatambay sa library. Palagi silang laman ng detention room. And you would never want to stay in a detention room, would you?

"Come in." Narinig kong wika ni Principal Steins mula sa loob. Tahimik kong pinihit ang door knob. Dalawang pares ng mga mata ang tumuon sa akin. Ilang segundo akong nakipagtitigan sa may-ari ng isang pares ng mga mata na iyon bago tuluyang pumasok. So he's here.

"Miss Summer Leondale. This is an unexpected visit from you. But you're welcome anyway," nakangiting wika ng punung-guro. He still had his air of authority. Too bad, I didn't hear his heart-felt speech about Tyler's death.

"I want to transfer back to Montello," diretsa kong sagot. Kumunot ang noo ni Ethan na nakaupo sa upuan sa harap ng principal's desk.

Tumangu-tango naman ang punung-guro na wari ay nag-iisip ng tamang desisyon sa ipinahayag ko. "Maaari ko bang malaman kung bakit nais mong magbalik sa Montello High?" Tanong niya.

I swallowed. "Because I think I'm not done here yet," sagot ko. Itinuro niya ang upuan sa harap ni Ethan. I hastily sat there and caught Ethan's stare. He

looked like he couldn’t believe I was there.

“Mr. Montreal was just reporting about the Christmas Ball last night. Did you receive the invitation?” Tanong ng principal. I frowned. So it was just a simple invitation from the school? Not from some illegal, underground organization?

“Ah, yes. Pinilit kong umabot subalit malapit nang matapos nang makarating ako,” sagot ko.

Humawak siya sa kaniyang bigote na tila nag-iisip. “I should have seen you there. But anyway, I think I have to brief you on some of the school’s changes. We have some visitors right now. They said that they were interested on investing in our school. Our education system caught their attention and wanted to make a research about it. It was a good opportunity so the management agreed.”

I gritted my teeth and controlled myself from snapping at him. This idiot! He didn’t even consider any ulterior motives at basta na lang nag-accommodate ng mga bisita? “I think that’s… careless.” Gusto kokng sabihing, I think that’s idiotic of you but I stopped myself. Baka kakapasok ko pa lang ay ma-kick out na kaagad ako.

Tumikhim si Ethan. “For the last few years, walang ganitong oportunidad na dumarating sa Montello High School. The move must be a rush but it was something we had to grab. To think na hindi maganda ang nagiging imahe ng school, this one could be our fuel to move forward.” Tumangu-tango ang principal sa sinabi ni Ethan bilang pagsang-ayon. Jeez. Dinadaan niya ako sa talino at persuwasyon.

I rolled my eyes at him. “If that’s persuasion, then I am deeply persuaded,” sarkastiko kong sabi. Maybe he didn’t know anything. I should be considerate. Tipid siyang ngumiti sa sarkasmo ko.

“Going back to Montello High is a good move, Miss Leondale. There’s no other way for this school to go than up. I promise you that,” wika ni Principal Steins.

“I’ll be hoping for that,” wika ko. Jeez. Hindi nila alam kung ano’ng consequences ng pagtanggap nila sa inaakala nilang malaking oportunidad.

“Kung gayon, Mr. Montreal, maaari mo bang ihatid si Miss Summer Leondale sa kaniyang klase? Maaari mo pa ring gamitin ang dati mong schedule pero kung may nais kang baguhin, maaari mo iyong ipaalam sa Registrar’s Office,” baling sa akin ng principal bago kami i-dismiss ng sabay ni Ethan. Tahimik kaming lumabas ng Principal’s Office. I already settled my matters about going back to Montello High but knowing that there were things happening under our knowledge right now was giving me creeps and some kind of adrenaline rush.

“So you decided to come back?” Ethan initiated a conversation.

With a sarcastic smirk on my face, I turned to his direction. “Missed me?” I asked.

Katulad ng dati at inaasahan, wala siyang naging reaksyon. Nanatili siyang pormal. It must be really hard to break this guy.

“Montello High gave nothing but bad memories to you. Are you sure that you’re okay to go back after all the things that happened?” Seryoso niyang tanong.

Sinalubong ko ang tingin niya. “I’m not sure of the current situation but I am sure of what I want,” seryoso ko ring sagot. I was so vague. I should have a line that will suit a super hero. Yeah. Maybe that was exactly what I was trying to do. I wanted to save Montello High. I wanted to save it because this was the only place that I could be comfortable on my own skin. And I was sure that I’d do whatever it took. And speaking of saving Montello High…

“Ethan, about those visitors- ” Hindi ko na nagawang ituloy ang sasabihin ko dahil nasa harap na kami ng silid ng aking klase. The door was already open and everyone was staring at me with wide, surprised eyes.

“Summer?” Untag ni Ethan sa akin. Maaaring hindi ito ang tamang oras upang sabihin kay Ethan ang tungkol sa mga bisita namin.

“Er, nothing. I still had to fill the role of a celebrity here. See ya,” wika ko at saka pumasok sa klase. Eyes full of wonder. Questions-asking if I was okay. Kung paano ako nakarecover. Why I was back. This was really weird. They should have done this questioning last night pero tulad ng konklusyon ko, wala silang natatandaan na matagal rin nila akong tinitigan kagabi. Yun nga lang, walang pagtatanong sa mga mata nila. No, there wasn’t anything in their blank eyes last night.

I answered the questions that could be answered and shook my head on those I couldn’t give details. Everything seemed normal aside from the thought that there were visitors in this school. Outsiders. So far, I haven’t really seen a trace of these so-called researchers.

“So how was the class, Sweetie?” Tumaas ang kilay ko sa endearment na ginamit ni Jin. I was on the cafeteria when he suddenly sat on the chair beside me.

“I’m a genius, dork,” walang emosyon kong sagot. Well, mukhang nadala ko rin ang pagiging studious ng Arturia. I’ve been answering questions without putting too much effort. Kung dati, mga walang kwentang sagot ang ibinibigay ko, ngayon, I was giving the exact answers and explain the concept. I was so weird. I couldn’t even recognize myself. Pero gaano man kalaki ang pinagkaiba, ganun pa rin ang reaksyon ng mga kaklase ko. Speechless.

“No disturbance? Everything went smoothly?” Tanong niya.

“Of course, there are many disturbance. And that was how everything went smoothly,” sagot ko. He just smiled at my sarcasm. Jeez. Looks like Jin wasn’t going to stop anytime soon. I realized that maybe it was time that I talk to him about his crazy, romantic notions. Masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko sa kaniya at saka gigil na kinagat ang hawak kong pepperoni pizza. I missed this pizza. “Kelan mo ba balak tumigil sa mga kalokohan mo?” Seryoso kong tanong. Because with everything that was happening, I didn’t think anyone of us really needed this crap.

“I will stop. Soon. I just don’t know exactly when. I already have that feeling that while I’m perfect for you, maybe… maybe we’re not meant to

be together. But I’m still playing with my wild cards,” nakangiti niyang sagot. Hindi rin nakalampas sa paningin ko ang lungkot na dumaan sa kaniyang mga mata. I swallowed, suddenly feeling a faint aching in my chest. So we’re back to this again.

“Jin, you know better than that. You can do better than that.” I wasn’t certain if what I was saying would discourage him from pursuing me dahil kahit kaibigan ko si Jin, sadyang wala lang mapupuntahan ang kalokohan niya. Hopefully, he was discouraged.

“Summer, kung gusto mo akong pigilan sa ginagawa ko, you can stop it. Because I won’t listen. I will do what I want and I’ll stop when I want to. Sa ngayon, hindi pa ako handang bitawan ang nararamdaman kong ito.” And he winked at me. Jin would always be Jin. Ano ba’ng inaasahan kong gagawin niya? Ilang minuto pa ang lumipas at dumating na rin sina Jamie at Mirden. I even saw the Black Government members entering the cafeteria. Yun nga lang, wala ang leader nila. That person. Will I ever see him again?

Ethan and Makki looked at my direction. The latter smiled at me. It seemed that he was itching to walk towards me kung hindi lang katabi ko si Jin Cast.

“Mukhang hinahanap mo ang taong iyon. Well, don’t. He’s not around. I think he’s gone for good,” komento ni Jin. Naramdaman ko ang pag-iinit ng pisngi ko. Seriously, I should give Jin Cast a broken kneecap.

“Hindi ko siya hinahanap,” mariin kong tanggi.

“Kung nandito si Van Freniere, malamang it might have a difference,” mahinang wika ni Mirden na hindi pinansin ang komento ko.

“What is he now? Guardian of this school?” Sarkastikong sagot ni Jin.

“Jin, it’s really obvious that you are jealous of him,” wika ni Jamie.

“Jeez. He’s not here but he still gets what I want. What’s with that person?” Inis na wika ni Jin.

“Guys, can we just not talk about that person?” Seryoso kong sabi sa kanila. They stopped. That jerk didn’t have any plans on saving Montello High. So this wasn’t on him. This was on us. We were the ones who would save this school because we were the ones who’s here. But of course with the help of an outside force. “May idea ba kayo kung paano natin makocontact si Detective Penber?” Tanong ko.

“Cellphones don’t work here dahil sinupressed nila ang signals ng mga wireless. No wi-fi as well. They said it was just temporary,” wika ni Mirden.

Saglit akong nag-isip. There was no way t have communication outside pero sigurado akong hindi lang ito for some school management purposes. Pagod na akong makatrabaho si Detective Penber but this situation would leave us with no choice. Isa pa, sa lahat ng illegal na gagawin namin, siya ang pinakalegal na pwedeng lapitan.

“The best thing that we can do for now is observe,” wika ni Jamie.

Tumango ako bilang pagsang-ayon. “And never trust anyone,” dagdag ko. They fell silent as we weigh the heaviness of my statement. Trust. There were really few people to trust right now. The four of us and Detective Penber. The rest were just visitors which would be out of the list. Then there were the gangsters. But could we trust the gangsters?

“But I don’t think Montello High is completely closed off to communication. Labas-masok sa campus ang kotseng pagmamay-ari ng ilang panauhin ng school. There must be a loophole. Some kind of opening we can exploit and use to our advantage. And that’s one that I will look for,” seryosong pahayag ni Jin. I looked at him. Yeah, he was deadly serious.

“Don’t let yourself get caught or I will kill you,” banta ko.

He smirked at me. “Whoah! Just the thought that you are worried about me makes me so willing to play with death.” Dinampot ko ang isang piraso ng tirang pepperoni mula sa plato ko at ibinato sa kaniya. Hindi nakakatuwa ang insinuation ng comment niyang iyon. I wasn’t ready to face another death yet. Not that. No one should die anymore.

Napansin ko ag pagpasok ng isang estranghero sa cafeteria subalit mukhang hindi siya itinuturing na estranghero ng mga estudyante.

“You like him?” Biro ni Jamie nang napansin niyang sinusundan ko ng tingin ang taong iyon hanggang sa pumuwesto ito sa bakanteng mesa.

“Who is he?” Hindi ko pinansin ang biro niya. This man looked smart and presentable. He seemed to have an air of authority around him. No wonder na hindi siya pinagtatangkaang gambalain ng mga estudyante rito. It was really a surprise that no one was actually throwing him a bottle of ketchup.

“One of the visitors. I think gumagawa siya ng research report about how our cafeteria was organized,” sagot ni Jamie. Cafeteria reports? How lame could their reasons be? I didn’t believe this crap. I didn’t like him. He looked like a good person but I didn’t like his presence here. Para siyang out-of-place. Lumapit sa kaniya ang isa sa mga tagapagsilbi ng cafeteria. She gave the stranger a flirtatious smile and handed him his food. Maybe that was his regular order: a tall glass of milk shake. After taking a sip, I saw the slight frown on his face and said something to the girl. Mukhang bahagya siyang nagko-complain about the milkshake. Tinapunan ko ng tingin ang strawberry milkshake ni Jamie. It was so improper but I grabbed it and took a sip.

“Whoah! If you want a glass of that, I could just buy you!” Reaksyon ni Jin. Speechless naman sina Jamie at Mirden. Subalit hindi ko na sila pinansin. This strawberry milkshake was good. So what’s that asshole complaining about? Maya-maya ay nakita kong may inabot na bagay ang estrangherong iyon sa tagapagsilbi. Hindi ko nagawang tingnan kung ano iyong dahil kaagad ng inilagay ng babae ang natanggap niya sa bulsa ng uniporme. Luminga-linga pa ito sa paligid bago nagpaalam. Nakita kong naglakad ito palabas ng cafeteria. I stood up and walked towards the door.

“Summer? Where are you going?” Nagtatakang tawag nila Jamie.

“Out,” malakas kong sagot at saka sumabay sa mga papalabas na estudyante. Hinanap ko ang tagapagsilbi ng cafeteria nang lumabas ako. I saw her entering the cafeteria again through the back door. I ran towards her

before she could reach for the door knob. It was not my intention but I grabbed her arm violently. Napangiwi siya sa higpit ng pagkakakapit ko.

“Aray! Bitawan mo ako!” Daing niya. Uh-oh. Mas hinila ko siya palayo sa door knob.

“Give it to me,” matigas kong wika. Sa una ay mukhang naguguluhan siya sa ginagawa ko. It took her a few seconds to realize kung ano ang ibig kong sabihin. She turned pale and white. That was a perfect reaction.

Mukhang desidido siyang hindi ibigay sa akin ang bagay na iyon. “Wala akong kahit na ano rito. Ano bang sinasabi mo?” Pagmamaang-maangan niya. She must be a few years older than me. And taller, too. But that wouldn’t help her.

Mas hinigpitan ko pa ang kapit sa braso niya nang pilit niya itong binabawi. Sinubukan niya akong itulak palayo subalit hindi ko parin siya binitawan. Kinapkapan ko siya gamit ang isa kong kamay. I tried to reach for her pocket subalit masyado siyang malikot. “Pwede ba, tigilan mo ako!” Desperado nitong sabi.

“Like I would do that!” Sarkastikong sagot ko at mas pinuwersa ko pa siya. I know that I was becoming violent by this time. I was getting pissed off with this tug-of-war and I couldn’t keep from hurting her.

“What’s this?” Malakas na tanong ng pamilyar na boses ng babae. Lumingon ako sa direksyon nito at nakita si Trinity Domingo. She was really epic with good timing. I smirked at her.

“Hi, Miss President. Long time, no see,” bati ko nang hindi binibitawan ang waitress.

“Yeah. I just heard that you’re back and now you’re harassing people?” Pormal niyang sagot. Halata ang disgusto niya sa presensya ko.

Nararamdaman ko ang pagpupumiglas ng hawak kong babae subalit hindi ko iyon ininda. I could always have a chit-chat while causing harm to people. This was what they call multi-tasking.

“Harassing her? You’re wrong. Can’t you see we’re actually close?” Sarkastiko kong sagot.

“Bitawan mo na ako. Kailangan na ako sa loob,” reklamo ng bihag ko. Uh, I can’t just let her go, can I?

Lumapit sa amin si Trinity. She was still beautiful and with authority. “Narinig mo siya,” seryoso niyang sabi. Tsk. Couldn’t she just leave and go have her lunch? Wasn’t she hungry?

“Hindi sa pinagtatabuyan kita but this girl and I have something to talk about-privately,” seryoso ko ring sabi. Subalit mukhang walang balak si Trinity na iwan kami. Instead, she tried to pull me away from the girl. She grasped my arm violently. Psh! This bitch! I started to feel the pain and the waitress took that as an advantage to escape. Sinundan ko ng masamang tingin ang waitress habang patakbo itong pumasok sa back door ng cafeteria. Sa sobrang pagkainis ko ay tinulak ko ng malakas si Trinity, dahilan upang bumagsak siya sa lupa.

“You bitch!” Gigil siyang tumayo at sumugod sa akin subalit walang kahirap-hirap ko siyang itinulak palayo. Muli siyang bumagsak sa lupa.

“Yeah, I’m a bitch. And you will never win against me!” Inis kong sabi. Why did she have to be on my way?! Sinimulan ko siyang talikuran subalit muli siyang nagsalita.

“Bakit kailangan mo pang bumalik? Iniisip mo ba na makikita mo si Van dito?” I could hear the frustration on her voice. And something else. Tumigil ako at lumingon sa kaniya.

“Hindi ako bumalik dahil sa taong iyon,” seryoso kong sagot. Nanatili siyang nakatungo. Hindi ko matiyak kung ano’ng ekspresyon niya.

“I’m still waiting for him to come back for me. But he’ll never come back, right?” Garalgal ang boses na wika niya. Now, I was certain of one thing. She was crying. Hindi ako sumagot. I couldn’t find the nerve to reply sarcastically to her. She was like this because of him. “Ever since he left, everything was a mess… everything in me… Kung babalik siya, alam kong

magiging okay ang lahat…” She seemed hopeless. She was dependent on him. Hindi ko maiwasang makaramdam ng awa para kay Trinity. She must really love him badly, like I liked Lawrence before. It was unrequited. And the most painful thing.

“He will never come back just because you need him. You know that. You know what kind of person he is,” wika ko. I wasn’t good at giving comfort to people so I didn’t know if I was just actually making it worst. She looked at me with pain in her eyes.

Mabagal siyang tumayo at inayos ang sarili. “Maybe you have a point. And then, maybe I’m just hopeless. Maybe Montello High is really lost,” wika niya at saka humakbang palayo. I frowned. There was something in the way she said that last statement.

“Trinity,” mahina kong tawag. Lumingon siya. “Bumalik ako, hindi dahil kaninuman. Bumalik ako dahil sa Montello High. At patutunayan ko sa’yong mali ka,” desidido kong sabi. Malungkot at matipid na ngiti lang ang binigay niya. It was not beautifully faked but it was still a stamp of negativity.

I will save the school, whatever it takes!

[38] Chapter 38: Through the Most Legal Means

Soundtrack: So Contagious by Acceptance

Chapter 38: Through the Most Legal Means

I can’t breathe. I can’t move. I can’t even think of ways to escape from this fatal situation. Hindi ko alam kung nasaan ako o kung paano ako nakarating dito. Naramdaman ko ang paninikip sa bandang tiyan ko kung kaya’t napilitan akong tingnan iyon. Maling desisyon. Gusto kong mawalan na lang ng malay sa senaryong nakita ko. Isang malaking aha sang nakapulupot sa akin mula paa hanggang dibdib. Nagpumiglas ako at tinangka kong makawala. But I couldn’t. Nahihirapan na akong huminga. Namamanhid na rin ang katawan ko. Just when I thought I would pass out, I saw his face. Why is he here? What is he doing here? Van Freniere is

running towards me. I don’t know why but I felt relieved that he is coming for me. Subalit ilang hakbang na lang ang pagitan naming ay nakita ko ang paglitaw ng isang anino na may hawak na baril. Nanlaki ang mga mata ko nang i-angat ng anino ang hawak nab aril at itutok kay Van. “No. No.” I murmured. I started shouting nonsense subalit walang lumalabas na boses mula sa akin. Gusto ko siyang balaan. Worse, gusto kong tumakbo papalapit sa kaniya at iligtas siya. But this snake is really making me do nothing. “No. Please.” Isang malakas na putok ang narinig ko and then Van stopped. He just looked at me and everything went blank.

“Summer! You don’t wanna be late, do you?” Narinig kong wika ni Jamie kasabay ng pagyugyog sa balikat ko. Parehong nakatunghay sa akin silang dalawa ni Mirden na pawang bihis na at handang pumasok. Agad akong bumangon at tumakbo sa banyo.

“Susunod ako!” Sigaw ko kasabay ng paglagaslas ng tubig mula sa shower. I was having that dream again. Siguro dahil napag-usapan namin ni Trinity ang taong iyon kahapon kung kaya’t kahit sa pagtulog ay nadala ko ang isiping iyon. But it still felt so freaking real, just like those other dreams. Pinilit kong burahin iyon sa isipan ko. Seeing that person in my dream made me want to go to him and check if he was alright. Hell! What the heck am I thinking?!

Nagmamadali kong tinapos ang paliligo at isinuot ang nakahanda nang jeans, gray tank top at black sweater sa aking kama. Simula nang bumalik ako sa Montello High ay kinailangan ko nang manghiram ng mga damit ni Jamie. I got nothing to say against her fashion sense because it was good. I just hated the thought that I could never get out. Not that they would allow me. Mabuti na lang at pinahiram sa akin ni Mirden ang extra sneakers niya. D mn! I’m so miserable! I didn’t have anything with me but that gown, heels and Autumn’s car. As if I could sell her car here.

I hurried my way out of the dormitory. Mangilan-ngilan na lang ang mga estudyante sa paligid kaya malamang ay nasa kanya-kanyang mga klase na ang mga ito. Tinakbo ko ang maluwag na lawn patungo sa main building ng Montello High kung saan naghihintay ang una kong klase. O maaari ring hindi na nila ako nahintay. Tinakbo ko ang hagdanan upang makarating sa ika-apat na palapag. Tahimik akong napahinto at agad na nag-kick-in ang

reflexes ko upang magtago nang makita ko ang dalawang taong tahimik na nag-uusap sa hallway. Wala nang estudyante sa labas kaya't nagagawa nilang pag-usapan ng malaya kung anumang pinag-uusapan nila.

It was that person from the cafeteria and he was talking to one of the students. The student looked familiar pero hindi ko alam kung ano'ng pangalan niya. Pormal na pormal ang mukha ng tinatawag nilang bisita samantalang halata naman ang desperasyon sa mukha ng estudyante. He looked nerdy and… Ah! I remembered him. One of the members of the student council. Ano namang problema ngayon ng alipores ni Trinity? Why the hell was he talking to that creepy milkshake man?

Mukhang hindi nila napapansin ang presensiya ko kung kaya't nakita ko nang may iabot na maliit na botelya ang estranghero. Masyado itong maliit na parang pwede mo lang iyong ibigay bilang isang cute na souvenir. It looked like nothing to be really worried about. Subalit nang abutin iyon ng estudyante at matapat sa liwanag ang botelya ay nakita ko ang kaunting asul na likido na tila ito ang pinakamagandang bagay sa mundong ito. Pare-parehong nakatuon ang tingin namin sa botelya, ni wala yatang may balak magbawi ng mata. It was still mesmerizing. I wonder what these other two think about that thing. They looked awed by it. Well, in my case, I didn't think I should be delighted by seeing it. It did nothing but bring me pain. Deadly and out-of-earth pain. One I never thought I would survive.

Napakurap ako nang ikulong iyon ng estudyante sa kaniyang mga palad at inilagay sa bulsa ng suot niyang jacket. D mn! These people! What do they think they're doing? I gritted my teeth. I was about to step out nang may humila sa akin pabalik. Sa paglingon ko ay nakita ko si Zach. He looked serious. And confused.

"Late?" Mahina niyang tanong. Nilingon ko ang papalayo nang pares bago ako sumagot.

"Never on time," sarkastiko kong sagot at saka muling naglakad.

"You're up to something, right? What is it again this time, Leondale?" Tanong niya. Nasa likod ko lang siya at tahimik na nakasunod.

“Oh, I’m planning to beat you on Montello High’s Power 10. Heard you’re already number 1. Are you scared now?” Tanong ko. I didn’t like it. The way he said that I was up to something sounded like I’m in for another trouble. Well, technically, yes. This was definitely the biggest trouble of the year. But can’t he just fake the indifference and make it sound like what I was doing was cool?

“I’m not really scared for myself. I’m scared for someone else.” Ganun pa rin ang tono ng boses niya. Indifferent. Mukhang kahit maghamon pa ako ng away sa harap niya ay hindi niya ako papatulan. Last time that I talked to him, he seemed to be on my side. But well, maybe he was just trying to flip Ethan off during that time.

“Oh?” I mocked him. He was still Zach Martinia, the leader of Dark Monarch.

“Jin normally gets in trouble. But never as big as this,” bigla niyang sabi na ikinabara ng lalamunan ko. That was a moment where I couldn’t find any sarcastic remarks to give. Or maybe I shouldn’t respond to it sarcastically. “So stop using him,” dagdag niya na ikinalingon ko. I took an urgent step towards him.

“I’m not using him,” may diin kong sabi. He almost crashed on me dahil sa biglaan kong pagharap sa kaniya. Mabuti na lang at mabilis siyang huminto.

“You just can’t see it because you are so busy with whatever sh t you’re doing. But he’s willing to do anything for you. He was never this… miserable and pathetic. But you have to show up and mess him up like a storm. And then you suddenly left without any f cking goodbye and now you’re back again. Of course, you’re a sh tty storm. All you can do is bring chaos.” He said that in one, same monotonous voice. There wasn’t even any change in his facial expression but he still made his points clear and strong. And it struck me hard and painful.

Ni hindi ko alam ang isasagot ko kundi, “I’m not using him.” But there was already doubt in my voice. Had I really used Jin? It was never my intention but… what if I was unconsciously doing it?

“Of course, you’re not. Maybe taking advantage is the right term. Or, rebound. I hope it’s just a rebound because it will at least only end up with a broken heart, emotional pain and suicidal thoughts. That is safer than the other alternative.” Wala pa ring emosyon ang boses niya habang sinasabi ang mga ito. That made me look guilty. Made me feel guilty. Nang hindi ko mahagilap ang isasagot ko ay humakbang si Zach palampas sa akin. I just watched him, still tongue-tied. Hindi pa siya nakalalayo nang muli siyang magsalita. “Keep way from the fire. Even just for the sake of that cuckoo-brained Jin.” Dumiretso na siya sa direksyon ng klase niya.

Meanwhile, I was late on my class but I thought I better miss it than be late. Idadahilan ko na lang na biglang sumakit ang tiyan ko or whatever. Not that they care. Sa tingin ko nga, siyam na pu’t walong porsyento ng mga dahilan ng estudyanteng umaabsent sa mga klase sa Montello ay hindi pinaniniwalaan ng mga guro.

I decided to go to the cafeteria instead. I decided I’d get hot coffee. Halos walang estudyante sa cafeteria. Tanging naroon lang ay isang pares ng estudyante na mas pinili pang maglandian sa cafeteria sa halip na pumasok sa klase. Ni hindi na iginalang ang pagkain. Lumapit ako sa counter at sinipat ko ang lugar kung saan naghahanda ng mga pagkain ang tagapag-silbi.

“Ano na namang kabaliwan kaya ang nais nitong gawin?” Bulong ng medyo may-edad nang babae sa counter. She must be the cashier.

“Excuse me?” Kunot-noo kong tanong. Ako ba ang tinutukoy ng baliw na babaeng ito?

She just eyed me like she was the wisest person on Earth. And the oldest. Jeez. “Sinaktan mo kahapon ang isa sa mga waitress ng cafeteria. Ano bang nangyayari sa’yo at pati ang mga hindi naman estudyante ay nadadamay?” Tanong niya.

Sinaktan ko ang tagapagsilbing iyon? Talking about exaggerated stories. Mas lalo tuloy lumala ang pagdududa ko. “A cup of hot coffee and a slice of pepperoni pizza,” wika ko. Wala naman siyang ibang sinabi. Inihanda lang

niya ang mga hinihingi ko. Tahimik akong pumunta sa dulong bahagi ng cafeteria and devoured my breakfast.

Elixir of Life. Parang gusto kong mabaliw nang rumehistro iyon sa utak ko. It was like remembering something that caused your own death. It was remembering that moment when I came face to face with Lawrence again. It was remembering Tyler on his last night. So horrible. And now I was sure that this horrible thing was inside this school. Ruining it from the inside. Of course, I wanted to save Montello High. But how the f ck could I do that if I was up against this giant stuff? I know I needed someone… It hurt to admit but I need that Detective. And crazy enough, I prefer to have that person's connections. But it seemed like he didn't care anymore. Mukhang totoo ngang hindi na siya babalik pa ng Montello. Kaya kailangan kong mag-focus sa pagkakaroon ng connection kay Detective Penber. Jeez. Working with that old bastard again.

Inis akong kumagat sa pepperoni pizza. I wished I didn't care anymore. I spend a few hours like that-planning and then criticizing my plans and then planning again while angrily biting my pizza in between. Screw everything! I need Detective Penber.

Wala sa loob na napalingon ako sa glass door and then I saw Autumn's car on the parking area. I was just here, sitting and bored. I wondered how she was now. I wondered about Henrietta Arturia. I wondered about Maximus Brown. That old man. Bakit pakiramdam ko, I really owed him something? Maybe I should pay him a visit again in that crappy bar if ever I got out of here alive. But for now, I had to focus on plans.

Ilang sandali pa ang lumipas at nagdatingan na ang mga estudyante sa cafeteria. It was lunch time. Di ako makapaniwalang lumipas ang mga oras na wala man lang akong na-accomplish. Hindi na rin ako nagulat nang umupo sa harap ko si Jin. Naalala ko ang mga sinabi ni Zach kanina. I felt a pang of guilt in my chest. Was I really using him? He was a gangster but he was really nice. And I couldn't remember any bad thing that he did to me. Well, aside from acting like my boyfriend which really pisses me off.

"Skipping classes for coffee and pizza? Sweet," komento niya.

“Jin. I had a talked with Zach.” Naging seryoso ang ekspresyon ni Jin. Mukhang alam na nito ang sentimyento ng kaibigan niya.

“Summer, don’t listen to him-”

“You should have lunch with him. He’s really jealous.” Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng pumasok sa utak ko at nagbiro ako. But it made Jin laugh a little. His laughter rang above the noisy ambiance of the cafeteria.

“Anyway, what was up with that cafeteria girl? It was the headline today.” I rolled my eyes at him. At saka ko naalala ang ibinigay ng estranghero kahapon. God, help me but please let it not be the Elixir of Life. Nakanganga akong napatingin sa tasa ng kape ko at saka ko pinakiramdaman ang aking sarili. I didn’t get that light feeling so there must have been nothing in my coffee. Inilapit ni Jin sa akin ang mukha niya. He was going to kiss me? I curled my fist into a ball.

“I found a way to contact Detective Penber,” bulong niya. My mind geared into full alert. Nagtatanong ang mga mata kong tumingin sa kaniya. “I sneaked into the school’s control room last night. Down ang lahat ng internet connection. They are trapping all communication signals. Except for one. The system is too complicated. Kailangan mo ng account, password at kung anu-ano pa just to access it. And they were only available for the visitors,” wika niya.

My mind started working. Now, we got hope. Maybe this wasn’t such a hopeless case after all. “We must do everything to access it,” mahina kong sagot. Siniguro kong kaming dalawa lang ang makakarinig ng usapan namin. He smirked at me.

“I don’t have an account or a password but I already got in. I’d accessed it.” Hindi ako makapaniwala sa sinasabi niya. “I sent a message for Detective Penber and deleted all traces of transaction from the laptop that I used.” Napanganga ako. Did he really just say that he managed to send an S.O.S. message to Penber? He was fast.

“How the hell did you do that?” Tanong ko.

Saglit siyang lumingon sa kinaroroonan ni Zach. Kasama nito ang ilan pang miyembro ng Dark Monarch. “Distractions. Zach distracted one of the visitors so I could use its laptop,” paliwanag niya. Kaya ba ganun na lang kung kumprontahin ako ni Zach kanina? I was using Jin’s craziness. He was using his friendship on Zach. I couldn’t tell which was worse.

“So, what was your message to Detective Penber? I hope it wasn’t just a simple ‘Hi!” Tanong ko.

“I said: Nightwoods on the clearing tonight,” sagot niya. Kumunot ang noo ko. Talaga bang hindi kaagad naintindihan ang mensahe ni Jin o slow talaga ang utak ko?

“You mean?” Paniniguro ko.

“I mean we’ll meet him tonight sa dulo ng Nightwoods. Merong lagusan sa gubat na iyon, though no one dares to go dahil nga sa mga karumal-dumal na nagyayari. Pero iyon lang ang daan kung saan hindi tayo mahuhuli ng mga gwardiya. Those guards! Kelan pa sila naging cyborg?” Paliwanag niya. That sounded like a plan but a flawed one. Pero mas mabuti na ito kesa wala. If we were going to meet Detective Penber tonight, we must give him something. Details. Evidence.

“We’ve got work to do, then. Sigurado ka bang maiintindihan ni Detective Penber ang mensahe mo?” Tanong ko. Well, seriously. What kind of message was that? Nagtipid sa pangungusap? Mukhang sanay ito sa telegrama, ah.

“I’m a man of few words. At saka, he’s smarter than you. Baka makita niya pa lang ang di pa nabubuksang mensahe sa e-mail niya, ay maisip na niya agad kung ano ang ibig sabihin nun, eh.” I glared at him.

“Well, let me show you how to be smart on kicking ass.”

He gave a carefree laugh. “If that’s something I have to endure just to get to you.”

Marahas akong tumayo at hinila siya sa kaniyang kinauupuan. Confusion crossed his face. I smirked at him. “I’ll show you then.” Nagmamadali ko siyang hinila tungo sa pinto ng cafeteria kung saan nakasalubong namin sina Mirden at Jamie na nagtataka kung saan kami pupunta.

“You know the cafeteria girl on the headline? Watch her for me,” utos ko sa kanila at naguguluhan silang tumango. I was still holding Jin’s arm nang makalabas kami.

“Wow. Now you’re the one doing the dragging,” Jin said, amused. Binitiwan ko ang braso niya.

“Let’s go to the Student Council office,” determinado kong sabi at saka nagpatiuna na sa paglalakad. He started after me with the hint of confusion in his eyes. Everyone seemed to be busy in the hallway. I didn’t do the courtesy of knocking nang matapat kami sa Student Council office. Pinihit ko lang ang door knob at saka pumasok. Ethan looked up from his desk. He was reading a book when we barged in. I scanned the room looking for that face. Subalit mukhang si Ethan lang ang naroon.

“Summer?” Nagtatanong na tawag ni Ethan. Saglit lang niyang tinapunan ng tingin si Jin.

“Nag-iisa ka lang ba rito?” Tanong ko. Umiling siya at itinuro ang isang estudyante na nagbabasa sa tagong dulo ng silid. He looked up at me and I met his eyes. It was him! I locked the door and walked towards him. Ethan and Jin seemed to be really confused now. But this was an easy job. I just have to talk to him.

“Hi, I’m Summer.” I faked a smile.

“I know,” sagot niya. He’s a high-pride nerd, I guess.

“And I need something from you,” dagdag ko. Tiningnan niya ako na parang nababaliw na ako at saka umiling. Inilapit ko ang mukha ko sa kaniya. “I want what that visitor gave you,” I whispered. Recognition registered on his face and he turned pale. “Kapag nalaman ito ng school administration, tingnan natin kung ano’ng mangyayari sa’yo.” But of

course, I won’t say it to the administrators. I should be careful on whom to trust this information.

“B-but it’s worth the price of brand new smartphones,” nahihintakutang sabi niya. Kung gayon ay ganun kamahal ang kakarampot na Elixir of Life. Marahas ko siyang hinila sa kwelyo.

“GIVE. IT. TO. ME.” Nakita ko sa gilid ng paningin ko ang paglapit nina Ethan at Jin. Ethan was about to stop me from harassing his colleague but Jin cut him off.

“Summer Leondale, what do you think you’re doing?” Tanong ni Ethan. His voice, as always, was filled with authority. I looked at him.

“I was saving this kid’s future and life,” sagot ko. It sounded like a joke but whatever. I just had to get that freaking Elixir of Life.

“Hindi ko alam ang sinasabi mo,” tanggi ng nerd. Mukhang nagkaroon siya ng lakas ng loob dahil sa pagtatanggol ni Ethan. I gritted my teeth. Inuubos ng isang ito ang pasensya ko. I grabbed a sharp-pointed pen from his desk at itinutok iyon sa kaliwang mata niya. He looked horrified, and if it was possible, turned even paler. Halata ang pagkagulat sa mga mukha nina Ethan at Jin. Ethan tried to reach me but Jin held him away.

“That’s too violent and against the rules, Summer,” kalmado pa ring wika ni Ethan. I wondered what could break this man’s mask.

“Yeah. You’ll-you’ll have detention and legal punishment if you hurt me?” Halata na ang takot sa boses ng SC Member. And he was sweating. I smirked at him.

“Do you think I care about the rules?” I asked at saka mas inilapit pa ang ballpen sa kaniyang mga mata.

“Ibibigay ko na! Ibibigay ko na!” Desperadong sigaw niya. I saw Jin laughed from the corner of my eyes. Kinuha ng nerd na lalaki ang maliit na botelya mula sa jacket at saka inilagay sa naghihintay ko nang palad. I saw

the rich, mesmerizing blue on the paleness of my skin. It was really beautiful. And deadly.

“There! You have it! Bitiwan mo na ako.” Halata pa rin ang takot sa boses nito. Binitawan ko ang kwelyo niya. “Please… Please don’t tell anyone about this. My dad will-” Hindi na niya naituloy ang paki-usap. It looked pathetic. How could he make such a life-ruining move? I stared him down.

“What’s your name?” Tanong ko. His eyes widened. Mukhang ayaw niyang ibigay ang pangalan niya.

“His name is Gabriel Ford.” Si Ethan ang sumagot. Ngayon ay alam na rin niya ang existence ng Elixir of Life.

“Gabriel. I won’t tell it to anyone. Just tell me about that man,” seryoso kong sabi.

Walang ibang nagawa ang si Gabriel kundi tumango. Itinago ko ang maliit na bote sa bulsa ng suot kong sweater. “We might be late for our class,” wika ko at saka naglakad palabas ng office. Sumunod sa akin si Jin.

“I really shouldn’t get on your bad side,” komento niya.

“I just showed you the ways of being a bad-ass, ass-kicker,” sagot ko. I just hope that everything will be in place matapos kong gumawa ng bayolenteng hakbang.

“Ano pala ang bagay na iyan?” Seryosong tanong ni Jin. He didn’t have any idea about the Elixir of Life.

“Elixir of Life,” mahina kong sagot. It sounded real. It sounded horrible.

“Drugs?” Tanong ni Jin.

“Not just an ordinary drug. This is evidence. Now let us plan on meeting that Detective tonight.”

With this, everything should be fine. I hoped we were tracking the right dots.

[39] Chapter 39: To Use and To be Used

Author's Note:

For all the sad songs… for all my heart-breaking lines, For the story of a girl who had the courage to tell someone that she likes him as a person, For the story of a girl who got the pain of a freaking rejection and became a f cking rebound, For the story of a girl who had the strength to move on and write… You've changed a lot. For the better.

Siel Alstreim

Soundtrack: Breathe Again by Sara Bareilles

Chapter 39: To Use and To be Used

"Can you, guys, enlighten us about that Elixir of Life?" Tanong ni Jamie. 30 minutes before curfew and we were on that part near the entrance of Nightwoods. Everything was already planned. Jin and I would enter the Nightwoods and meet Detective Penber while Mirden and Jamie would serve as the look-out. Kung meron lang akong pagpipilian, ayokong pumasok sa lugar na ito. But looking at Mirden and Jamie, they seemed even more terrified at the thought of entering a crime scene.

"It should be classified information, Jamie. Remember when I was kidnapped?" Mirden filled them both about EOL. I didn't listen. It wasn't like I wanted to hear it again and again. It was classified information.

Mirden and I were witnesses but it wasn't enough for the police to work with. What they needed was concrete evidence that such drug existed. Mangilan-ngilan lang sa mga pulis ang nakakaalam tungkol rito. At si Detective Penber na yata ang pinaka-obssessed sa kasong ito. Kahit nakakairita ang ugali niya at isa siyang malaking manggagamit, it was still good that he didn't give up on this yet. He was obsessed with the Freniere Mafia. And with recent events, the Elixir of Life also gained his interest. I know that he was just using us but we also need him. I guess people were really users.

“Jin, we’re running out of time,” may kaba sa dibdib kong sabi. He grabbed my hand and I looked at him questioningly pero hindi na ako kumontra pa. Mukhang kakailanganin ko rin ng lakas. The Nightwoods was the place of my nightmares. We were about to leave nang may magsalita sa di-kalayuan.

“Summer, I can’t let you go in there without me,” seryosong wika ni Makki at lumapit sa amin. Nagsukatan sila ng tingin ni Jin. It smelled like trouble. Agad akong pumagitna sa kanila. Hindi ito ang tamang oras para mag-away.

“Makki, you don’t understand. Kailangan naming gawin ito,” wika ko. Of all the people in Montello High, he was one of the few I knew I could trust. But seeing him made me remember that person. And thinking of that person distracts me.

“I will come with you. Kung ano man ang kailangan mong gawin, just do it. Basta kasama mo ako.” He paused for a while before continuing. “Tyler was like a little brother to me. And Van is a brother to me. I miss them both and I know-I know that they would expect me to protect you,” determinado niyang sabi. Naramdaman ko ang pagpisil ni Jin sa palad ko. I looked up at him.

“Let him go with us. Wala rin naman tayong ibang choice,” ani Jin.

Tumingin ako kay Makki at saka tumango. I silently prayed for everything to go well. This was the point where you couldn’t trust anyone outside the circle but we have to go through it. This time, maybe Mrs. Montgomery was right. That there were times when I just have to follow my guts and not think at all. I could trust Makki. And if ever my decision was wrong, I would show him what happens to people who break my trust.

We bid farewell to Jamie and Mirden at saka tahimik at buong ingat na pumasok sa Nightwoods. Twenty-three minutes left bago itaboy ng mga school guards ang mga estudyante papasok ng dormitory. Mas naging istrikto sila ngayon kumpara dati. We picked up our pace in the most careful way. Jin was still holding my hand habang pinangungunahan niya ang grupo namin. Nasa likod ko naman si Makki. I didn’t like this formation. It

seemed like they were protecting me from all sides. Parang gusto kong isulat sa noo ko ang katagang ‘I can handle myself.’

But we were running so fast for me to whine. Nahigit ko ang aking paghinga nang matanaw ko ang puno kung saan ako itinago ni Tyler at pinrotektahan. I wanted to stop. I wanted to go to that place and run my fingers through that tree. Loneliness crossed my heart but I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t grieve right now. I’ve got to move on. Mukha namang naramdaman ni Jin ang pag-aalinlangan ko. Mas hinigpitan niya ang hawak sa kamay ko. Itinuon ko na lang ang aking paningin sa dinaraanan namin. Masyadong tahimik ang Nightwoods. Walang bakas ng kahit na anumang nabubuhay. Kahit kuliglig, kahit huni ng nabulabog na ibon o iyak ng kung anumang hayop sa paligid. Tanging tahimik lang na paghinga ng naglalakihang mga puno. Ang mas nakakapangilabot pa ay hindi ito naririnig kundi nararamdaman lamang. Halos mabingi na ako sa lakas ng tibok ng puso ko. I was scared. No. I was so freakin scared of this place. The terror it brings me was out of this world.

Nilingon ko si Makki. Mukhang abala siya sa paglingon sa paligid. Halata na kinakabahan siya. He didn’t know anything and yet he still went with us. What was with these fearless gangsters? Ilang minuto pa ang tinakbo namin bago kami iniluwa ng kagubatan sa malawak na kapatagan. It was still dark subalit maaaninag pa rin sa paligid ang mga bagay. Isang pares ng headlight ang umilaw mula sa malayo. I recognized that vintage car. This time, pinangunahan ko ang pagtakbo tungo roon. Jin and Makki followed behind me. Pumasok ako sa passenger seat ng Mustang samantalang sina Jin at Makki ay sa back seat. Namatay ang headlight at muling nabalot sa kadiliman ang paligid. Now, it was really more like a scene from a freaking horror story. Ilang sandaling nag-adjust ang mata namin sa dilim bago namin naaninag ang isa’t isa.

“Happy reunion, batchmates!” Wika ni Penber at saka nagsindi ng sigarilyo. What the hell! I coughed when the smoke filled the car.

“You, sh tty, a s-face! Why don’t you stick your cigarette in your a s!” Hindi ko napigilang sabi. Jin snickered at the back. Makki remained clueless.

Detective Penber opened the roof of the convertible Mustang. Mukhang balewala lang sa kaniya ang sinabi ko kanina. “Hey, little kid. There was no need for profanities!” Aniya. I just glared at him. I really couldn’t believe he was a law officer. Mukha naman siyang taong walang paki-alam sa rules.

“Nice to see you, detective,” nakangiting wika ni Jin.

“Uhm, why do we have to go through all those fears just to meet Sherlock Holmes?” Naguguluhang tanong ni Makki.

“Because you are going to meet Sherlock Holmes, that’s why you had to go through all those fears,” walang sense na sagot ni Penber. I rolled my eyes at him.

“You’ll understand soon, Makki,” wika ko. Hindi na nagkomento si Makki. Whatever he was thinking, I know he would listen.

“So, how’s Montello? I missed that place,” walang kaseryosohang wika ni Detective Penber. Kinapa ko ang isang bagay mula sa aking bulsa at kinuha iyon. It was still brilliant and tantalizing in the dark. The rich blue was glowing. Natahimik ang lahat sa kotse.

“Evidence,” wika ko at saka inilagay iyon sa palad ni Penber. Bigla siyang naging seryoso at in-examine iyon.

“Project EOL. D mn! Those bastards! Alam kong hindi lahat ay nasunog sa laboratoryong iyon,” seryosong wika ni Detective Penber. It was more like he was talking to himself than to us. He probably was. “Paano niyo nakuha ito?” Maya-maya ay tanong niya. He was more focused and more serious now. This is the detective we really need.

“Through the most legal means,” tipid kong sagot. Mahinang tawa ang binitawan ni Jin sa likod.

“When it comes to you, nothing is ever legal,” mabilis na balik ng detective. I just rolled my eyes. Nagsalita ang hindi gumagawa ng ilegal.

“Mula sa isang estudyante. Mukhang nagsi-circulate na ito sa buong campus. They were making the students as their test subjects,” wika ni Jin. Halata naman ang pagkabigla sa mukha ni Makki.

“Is that a drug?” Tanong niya. Walang sumagot dahil mukhang alam naman ni Makki ang sagot sa sarili niyang tanong.

“During the Christmas Ball, everyone seemed controlled, too,” dagdag ko.

“Everyone? Even Montgomery and Throckmorton?” Tanong ng Detective.

“No,” si Jin ang sumagot. “Mirden warned us not to drink the newly introduced cocktails. Puno na kami ng suspetsa bago pa man ginanap ang Christmas ball. We took precautions and had canned soda instead,” paliwanag ni Jin. Yeah, Mirden knows better. Alam niya kung ano ang pwedeng idulot ng Elixir of Life.

“Newly introduced cocktail? Kelan pa gumawa ang Montello High ng drinks?” Kunot-noong tanong muli ng detective. Nanatili akong tahimik. Mas alam ni Jin ang detalye ng Christmas Ball. He was there the whole time. Ni hindi nga ako nagtagal doon ng higit pa sa labinlimang minuto dahil hinila na niya agad ako palayo sa okasyon.

“It wasn’t from Montello High. It was labeled as “The Stones,”” sagot ni Jin na ikinatigagal ko, maging ni Detective Penber. Awtomatikong nagsalubong ang paningin namin. Walang dudang pareho kami ng iniisip.

“Sh t! That drink during that masquerade ball. We actually attended the enemy’s party,” wika ni Detective Penber. Well, now it was clear. Nung panahong iyon, ang balak naming sundan ay si Tres Freniere at ang ka-deal nito sa illegal drugs and gun. It never crossed our minds that that party was actually organized by the enemy, the people behind the Elixir of Life. Ang akala namin ay ginamit lang nilang decoy ang party para maitago ang transaksyon.

“Hey, hey, hey! The Stones tasted good,” biglang wika ni Makki.

“You had just been a test subject, idiot,” komento ni Jin.

“Oh, really. You should have warned us, Einstein. Where’s your curly hair and genius ass?” Ganti ni Makki. Nagpalitan ng masamang tingin ang dalawa. Di ko naiwasang mapailing. These two gangsters were known for being cool and easy going. Pero pag silang dalawa na ang nag-uusap, parang di pa sila nagsasalita, magkakapikunan na sila

“We have these so-called ‘visitors’ at school now. I’ve only seen one of them, though. Pero sa kaniya nanggaling ang Elixir of Life,” baling ko kay Detective Penber. He looked absorbed in his own thoughts. But whatever he was thinking, I had no intention of knowing. Malamang ay nasa formula at chunks of words and numbers pa iyon sa utak niya. Mas gusto kong malaman na lang ang impormasyon kapag naproseso na iyon ni Penber at madali nang intindihin.

“They are being careful, then. These information are valuable.” Tinago niya sa bulsa ng kaniyang mahabang coat ang EOL. It looked secure in there.

“So what are we going to do then?” Tanong ni Makki. Mukhang nakahabol na siya sa sitwasyon dahil sa mga impormasyong narinig niya sa amin. At mukhang nakikisali na rin siya.

“Nothing. For now. They are too sleek. We have to do something big to ruin their masks. Like setting fire to ruin the formation of ants.” We frowned at Penber’s analogy. It sounded poetic… and troublesome.

“Spill it out, Lord Byron,” wika ni Makki. I rolled my eyes. What was wrong with Makki tonight? Why was he calling people with names?

On the other hand, Detective Penber seemed amused. He looked at me with a smirk on his face. Uh-oh. This looks like trouble. “What are you up to, Summer? It’s good that you’re back. But I want to know the reason especially since the last time we talked, you were decided to stay at Arturia for good,” tanong niya sa akin.

Agad na uminit ang ulo ko. Alam ko na ang ganitong mga litanya ng taong ito. Idadaan niya ako sa word play na parang naglalaro lang ng chess. And before I knew it, checkmate na ako. Wala na akong choice kundi gawin ang

ipinapagawa niya. Binigyan ko siya ng isa sa pinakamasama kong tingin. “Why the hell should it be me again?!” Galit kong tanong.

“Because you are my best undercover agent,” hindi natinag niyang sagot. Tila naghihintay naman sina Jin at Makki na sumabog ako.

“I’m not your f cking undercover agent!” Mataas ang boses kong sagot. Come to think of it, I was always risking my life sa ipinapagawa niya sa akin. And he’s not even paying me! Did he think this was some kind of a community service or social work?

“But you’re the only one who was able to enter the Freniere Mansion and get out of it alive,” kalmado niyang sagot. I didn’t get it. Ano bang koneksyon nito sa Freniere Mansion?

“You what?!” Halos hindi naman makapaniwalang wika ni Jin, surprised at what he learned about his fake girlfriend. I felt a little guilty. It seemed that he was really looking up on things seriously. Napansin ko naman ang nakakalokong ngiti ni Makki. Sumipol pa siya ng mahina. Tsk. Tsk. I wasn’t a man-hater but with the way they were acting, they were just giving me multiple reasons to criticize the male species’ way of thinking.

“What the hell does this have to do with the Frenieres?” Naiinis kong tanong kay Detective Penber. He was really obsessed with the Mafia Freniere’s activities. Kaya tuwing napapasok ang underground organization na iyon ay alam kong mayroon siyang ibang intensyon. He was planning to hit two birds with one stone. And the poor stone that he was going to use was me. All this time, yun ang pinaplano niya. Good thing, I grew a brain and realized it. Why the hell should it be me?

“We need a bait para magulo ang organisasyon ng EOL. And we need to roll the dice,” kampanteng wika ni Detective Penber.

“And?” Nararamdaman kong hindi ko magugustuhan ang susunod niya sasabihin. I really hate this man!

“Kapag malaking pain ang inihulog mo sa tubig, mababaliw ang mga isda,” sagot niya.

“F cking feeding frenzy,” mahinang wika ni Jin.

“Ano’ng gusto mong gawin ko?” Naiinip ko nang tanong. Enough with the sugar-coating because it never tasted sweet. Seryosong tumingin sa akin si Penber and that was when I realized that he got me! Again! Sh t!

“Dalhin mo si Giovanni Freniere sa Montello High,” wika niya.

Hindi ako kaagad nakapagsalita. This was the craziest plan I have ever heard.

“Hey, hey! What?! You are going to make my best friend as your bait?! And you are even planning all of this in front of me! You’re a bunch of lunatics! I won’t-”

“Shut up, Makki!” Angil ko sa kaniya na ikinatahimik ng sasakyan. I was so frustrated. Everytime I try to run away as far as possible, I would find myself running into circles. And worse, I always find myself going back to him. Guess there’s no escaping the black roses. So at this point, I asked myself how much I was willing to do just to save Montello High. The most frustrating thing was, the answer was obvious. I was up to do anything even though it was dangerous just to save Montello High. And Detective Penber knew it. So he took advantage of it.

“Paano ko siya maibabalik sa Montello High?” Suko ko nang tanong. Napuno ng protesta nila Jin at Makki ang sasakyan. Ang nakakatawa pa nito, nagkasundo silang tumutol sa plano pero magkaibang magkaiba pa rin ang mga dahilan nila.

“What? Babalik ka na naman sa lugar na walang nakakarating?” Tanong ni Jin.

“You are really going to use Van?” Tanong ni Makki.

Tiningnan ko sila ng masama. Good thing na nadadaan sila sa tingin. Gustung gusto ko nang sipain ang dalawang ito palabas ng kotse. Detective Penber looked satisfied.

“I will help you. We will plan on kidnapping Van in his own house.”

I frowned. He was coming with me, then. Dati, gusto niya lang akong itapon sa lugar na iyon na parang spy. Now he wanted to come with me. “I know your plans, Sherlock Holmes,” wika ko.

He smirked. “The end justifies the means. No matter how unethical you may think my plans are, my only intention is to destroy the bad guys.” I rolled my eyes at him. He was acting like a superhero again.

“So when are we planning his kidnapping?” Tanong ko. Hindi pa rin makapaniwala ang reaksyon nina Jin at Makki sa likod.

“Now.” Napatingin kaming lahat sa detective. “The Frenieres don’t sleep. Kailangan lang nating masiguro na aabot sa curfew ang dalawang ito.” Tukoy nito sa dalawang gangster sa likod.

“Guys, you need to go back,” baling ko sa kanila.

“Pero, Summer-” sabay nilang protesta.

“I can handle this,” putol ko. Hindi sila umimik. Tila nagdadalawang-isip. “Trust me,” dagdag ko. Maya-maya ay tila nakumbinsi sila at lumabas na ng kotse. I sighed. Subalit hindi pa lumalampas ang limang segundo ay bumukas ang pinto sa passenger seat and Jin reached down for me. He leaned down while holding the back of my neck. I closed my eyes as he planted a kiss on my forehead. It was gentle and sweet. But I didn’t think I deserve it. I wish I felt the same way for him. But I care for him. I really do. It was just that…

“Be safe, Summer. I’ll wait for you,” wika niya bago muling isinara ang pinto ng sasakayan. I watched the two of them disappear into the Nightwoods.

“You’ve got a sweet boyfriend there,” komento ni Detective Penber habang ini-start ang Mustang.

“He’s one of the reasons why I want to save Montello High,” seryoso kong sagot. Tumangu-tango siya.

“Montello High gave you the worst memories but you still find it worth saving?” Tanong niya.

Nagkibit-balikat ako. “Well, I’ve only just started making memories and so far, I’ve only made few. Most of it were from Montello High. Whether it was bad or not, there are just some memories worth saving.” I gave him a smile that I learned from Arturia. Napailing siya. Hindi ko alam kung maiintindihan niya ako dahil sa sobrang talino niya o dahil sa sobrang talino niya ay hindi na niya maisip ang pinakasimpleng bagay. Itinuon ko na lang ang paningin sa dinaraanan namin.

Sa ngayon, ang kailangan kong isipin ay kung paano ko maibabalik ang taong iyon sa Montello High. Alam kong magkikita rin kami kalaunan pero hindi ko inaasahan na ngayon ang araw na iyon. Ni hindi man lang naging sapat ang ilang buwan kong pananatili sa Arturia para makapaghanda ng sasabihin ko sa muli naming paghaharap. Maybe part of me had really moved on and never wanted to go back and cross path with him. But the other part? It just stayed there. In that filthy bar. Stuck on that moment when he grabbed me close to him. I was still there. I was still caught and prisoned by that kiss.

“I can see that you’ve changed a lot. For the better. Maybe going to Arturia wasn’t a bad thing, after all,” untag sa akin ni Detective Penber. Malapit na kaming lumiko sa kalsada tungo sa kawalan. Hindi ako sumagot. I was so occupied on what was about to happen.

“Kapag natapos na ang lahat ng ito, I swear, I will recognize your helpful cooperation,” wika niyang muli. I gritted my teeth. How could he piss me off this bad? “We are doing this because this is what’s right. We’re helping not only Montello High but also the society,” dagdag pa niya. Lumiko kami sa daan patungo sa Freniere Mansion. It looked colder now. And darker.

“Kapag nahuli ko na ang Freniere Mafia at ang organisasyon sa likod ng EOL, it will be a history. I can’t even wait for it.” Marahas akong lumingon sa kaniya. I’ve had enough of it. I terribly need Detective Penber’s help and

expertise and resources but not this time. This one task, I could do by myself. After all, ako pa lang ang nakakalabas ng buhay sa mansion ng mga Freniere ng dalawang ulit.

Kinapa ko ang jacket ko and kinuha ang isang bagay. It was still cold, hard and motionless. “Stop the car,” wika ko.

“What?” Naguguluhang tanong ni Detective Penber. I knew he heard me well. He just couldn’t believe it. And so to make it more real, inilabas ko ang baril ni Catherine del Valle at itinutok sa kaniya.

“I’m going to that place that made me a legend and now that I’m breaking my own record, I don’t want to share it with anybody. Now, stop the car and get out,” seryoso kong sabi.

He frowned. And I had to give him props for not being scared of me right now. Maybe that goes with his career and all. “No. This is my car. And you won’t do that,” wika niya.

I smirked and took the gun’s safety off and let the nose touch his temple. He flinched but rather than be scared, he only looked exasperated. But I wasn’t backing down. “I’ve changed a lot. For the better,” ulit ko sa sinabi niya kanina. He stopped the car. Wala siyang nagawa kundi lumabas ng vintage Mustang. Pumwesto ako sa driver’s seat at binuhay muli ang makina.

“We really need your help. I just have to do this alone,” wika ko sa kaniya bago ko pinatakbo ang sasakyan palayo. I just saw him watching me as I disappeared on the cold darkness. What was I thinking? Nothing. I was just following this revolutionizing guts of mine. Here goes nothing.

Freniere Mansion. It was probably the most dangerous place in existence. I must have been losing my right mind to take a step on this ground again. But I couldn’t bring myself to stop the fast car I was driving. I couldn’t even blink my eyes even though in just a few seconds, I was going to crash to the slowly closing gates of Freniere Mansion.

And I did. Malakas ang naging impact nito subalit hindi ko na ito ininda. I was in. Nakapasok ako sa delikadong teritoryo ng Mafia. And fortunately

for me, nakita ko si Van Freniere. He was talking to Tres but they stopped when they saw me approaching fast. Inihinto ko ang vintage Mustang ni Detective Penber sa mismong harap nila at saka ako galit na lumabas. I pulled the gun from my jacket at itinutok ito sa mukha ni Van.

“Whoa! Feisty!” Komento ni Tres subalit inignora ko lang siya. Sa puntong iyon, marami na ring matataas na kalibre ng baril ang nakaabang na pasabugin ang bungo ko subalit wala akong paki-alam.

“Sumama ka sa akin o papuputukin ko ito!” Seryoso at matapang kong wika.

Malakas na tumawa si Tres. A laugh full of hatred. Gusto kong panghinaan ng loob subalit alam kong hindi pwede. I was doing this for Montello High.

“Van Freniere!” I put my finger to the trigger.

“Wala akong panahon sa mga bagay na walang kwenta. Umalis ka na,” wika ni Van.

“No! Kailangan kitang dalhin!” Matigas kong sabi.

“Leondale. Hindi mo maipapanakot sa akin ang baril na iyan. I don’t follow commandments just because I’m at gun point,” walang ngiting sabi niya. Of course! What was I thinking?! Hindi ko magagawang kidnapin si Van gamit lamang ang baril na ito. But maybe, this other thing would do.

I grabbed the collar of his jacket and pulled him towards me. I snaked my other arm to his nape and pressed my lips against his. He didn’t move. It was like I put him into a state of complete immobilization. He acted like I just stole his rogue, arrogant soul. So I started kissing him in the way he kissed me in that filthy bar. Maybe I was a quick-learner but I needed this plan to work. For a second, he was too stunned and shocked. But then, he was suddenly kissing me back.

For a moment, the feel of his lips made me forget what I came there for. I was torn between kissing him or running away from him. Luckily for me, when his hands cupped my face, I realized that he was distracted enough. I

managed to lean him against the back-seat door of the open-roof Mustang. In a swift move, I pushed him and he stumbled into the passenger's seat, too dazed to even react. I quickly climbed into the driver's seat, closed the Mustang's roof, locked all the doors and started the engine.

Everyone else was also too stunned for a moment. Ang nakatatandang Freniere ang unang nakabawi. Tres raised his right hand, as if trying to stop anyone from doing something to us. I didn't want to look to the back seat for fear that Van had already recovered his senses. I raced the car away from the Freniere Mansion, still reeling from the feel of the kiss and the reality of what I'd just done.

I did it. I had kidnapped the Mafia boss.

Soundtrack: Save You Simple Plan

Chapter 40: Driver s Seat

Nakabibingi ang lakas ng kaba sa dibdib ko. Ni hindi ko alam kung paano ko nagagawang magmaneho ng sasakyan sa ganitong sitwasyon. Pero wala namang rule na nagsasabing, Don t drive when you re nervous. Maybe there was, Don t drive when you re having a heart attack.

My kidnap victim, meanwhile, was still in a trance on the passenger seat. I had no idea how long he would stay that way. Malapit na kaming lumabas sa teritoryo ng Freniere Mafia. I really don t know if it was mere luck that no one dared to shoot at us. Lumingon ako sa passenger seat. Oh yeah. No one shot us because he was with me. Isang metro na lang at magiging ligtas na kami.

Five. Four. Three. Two. One. I held my breath. I made it. Subalit agad ring nawala iyon nang maramdaman ko ang malamig na bagay na nakadikit sa sentido ko. At hindi ako tanga upang hindi malaman na dulo iyon ng baril. Oh, no! The spell on him was lifted.

 Ang lakas ng loob mo, Leondale, malamig at walang emosyong boses ang pumailanlang sa sasakyan. I wouldn t dare look.

I I have reasons. Pilit kong inalis ang kaba sa boses. I thought I was safe because I was already out of the lion s den. I should have realized that I bought the fearsome lion in the car with me.

I don t see through those reasons. I see through your damned stupid acts, sagot niya. Ugh. How could his mere voice inflict fear in my bones? I was having a feeling that he was going to finish me off here and now. Huminga ako ng malalim. Para akong humaharap sa judgment day. Nakasalalay sa lalabas sa bibig ko ang magiging kinabukasan ko kung aabutin pa ko ng bukas.

Bago mo ako patayin, you need to save Montello High. The Elixir of Life is swallowing it whole and we won t allow that to happen! We re simply trying to do our best to stop it and

I have nothing to do with Montello High anymore.

Hindi ako agad nakasagot. Kung tutuusin, wala na nga siyang kinalaman sa Montello High. He quit going to the school already. So why put him back in? Why kidnap a person just to throw him into a mess? When Detective Penber told us the plan, it sounded right. But now it sounded illogical and childish to me. This time, I know that I stupidly acted according to Detective Penber s plans. He was playing his f cking mind chess game again and I was one of his stupid pawns!

I shrugged my shoulders in defeat. Maybe there isn t really anything I can do. Maybe I couldn t really save it. It s so stupid of me to rely on chances, wika ko. The worst part was I took a chance on the possibility that he wanted to save it, too. Which now I know he didn t. I was wrong. I was just assuming. I pulled the car to a stop and closed my eyes. I was so disappointed with myself.

What are you doing? Tanong ni Van. Lumingon ako sa kaniya. Nakakunot ang noo niya na sinagot ko rin ng kunot-noo.

I m I m giving up, sagot ko. His frown deepened. Nagulat ako nang bigla niya akong hapitin sa baywang at buhatin mula sa driver s seat. I was

almost sitting on his lap but he moved towards the driver s seat and swapped places with me. This guy!

I ll drive, wika niya at ini-start ang Mustang. Hindi ko na nagawang magsungit sa stunt nay un dahil lalo lang akong naguluhan sa ginawa niya. Wasn t he going to kill me? Ma lalo akong nagtaka nang hindi pabalik sa mansion ang tinahak naming daan kundi papunta sa Montello High.

Do you mean to go to mahina kong naisatinig.

You pulled this stunt. You took an important person in the mafia and disabled them. Sa tingin mo ba hahayaan ka nilang mabuhay? Tanong niya. Hindi ako sumagot. It seemed to me that everyone s out to kill me.

Aside from that, there is also a man in there who s still grieving the death of his youngest son. And then you trespassed into his house, pulled a gun and took another one of his cherished sons away. What do you think will be his next move?

Pinanlamigan ako ng katawan at napatulala kay Van. Tila naririnig ko pa rin ang malamig na kahilingan ni Algernon Freniere nang huli ko siyang makita. I was now a dead meat.

You have also stolen something from the most dangerous person in the planet. You don t kiss me without permission, Summer Leondale. It s forbidden and disrespectful. Anyone who disrespects me deserves the punishment of death. I shivered. What s with this person? Parang hinahatulan niya ako ng kamatayan.

Jeez! Why are you always like that? Why should it always have to be about death? Why not about life and color and rainbows? I managed to ask even though fear was starting to eat my bones.

Tumingin siya sa akin nang ilang segundo. Hanggang sa halos umabot na ng isang minuto. Nanlalaki ang mga matang ibinaling ko ang paningin ko sa wind shield. Doon lang niya narealize na nakipagtitigan siya sa akin habang nagmamaneho. Halos trumiple ang kaba sa dibdib ko. He was always

giving me cause for heart attack! Hindi ko na sigurado kung ano ang posibleng maging dahilan ng kamatayan ko sa tuwing kasama ko siya.

A-are you planning to kill the both of us?! Nauutal at hindi makapaniwala kong tanong nang ilagay niyang muli ang konsentrasyon sa pagmamaneho. He just frowned at me, at everything. This was so weird.

Have you ever thought of the consequences of what you re doing? Seryoso niyang tanong habang nakatuon ang paningin sa kalsada. Consequences of what I ve done? I only wanted to save Montello High. And if I would be able to do it, everything will be well and the only consequence would be good.

I have good reasons, sagot ko.

Of course, you re pulling your heroic stunts again. Without thinking. When will you ever learn? Napapailing na wika niya. Masamang tingin ang ipinukol ko sa kaniya. He was treating me like I was the most stupid person that ever walked the earth again.

I m thinking. We have plans! I m not an idiot! Depensa ko sa sarili ko. Unti-unting nawawala ang takot ko at napapalitan ng inis.

Tumawa siya nang may pang-iinsulto. Plans? Is this what you call a plan? Okay. Then, what are you going to do after this? Tanong niya.

We will break the walls of the enemies. They will be disorganized, I answered confidently.

And what will happen to me? Tanong niyang muli. I looked at him. I didn t think about that. I was always thinking that he was too strong to ever be put into consideration. I was using him. I was using him without thinking how it would end up for him and this is so inhuman of me to do so.

T-tutulungan ka ng mafia, right? Wika ko. Yes. That s right. They would save him.

He gave me a fake laugh. I would never go back to Montello High. The mafia already pulled themselves out of there. I got another plan in the works, seryoso niyang sagot.

But those people behind the Elixir of Life might be the same ones behind Tyler s death I didn t know what made me say that but I had been always thinking of the possibility that they were connected. Van stiffened from my statement.

I am washing my hands out of it, matigas niyang sabi. I decided to leave this place. This was supposed to be my last night.

Nahigit ko ang aking paghinga sa nalaman ko. I couldn t breathe. The thought of him leaving seemed to me like the worst thing that could happen.

I I.. No! No, you shouldn t leave! Gusto kong bawiin ang reaksyon ko subalit ano pa bang magagawa ko. To my surprise, he stopped the car. This night might just be full of surprises and stopping of cars.

You have no f cking idea how it s like to be Giovanni Freniere, kontrolado ang boses niyang sabi. I could sense anger, hatred and possibly pain in it. You have no idea how to be in a situation where your only choice is to leave, dagdag pa niya.

I just stared at him, wondering where these emotions were coming from. Palaging nakikita si Van bilang isang halimaw na bawat daanan ay kusang niyuyukuan ito. Subalit ang pag-alis at pag-iwan ng lahat? Dahan-dahan akong napailing.

You don t have to leave, seryoso kong sabi sa kaniya. But who the hell was I to tell him that? I witnessed my childhood best friend s death and I turned into a defensive, delinquent, sadistic bitch who shut the world around me. I saw Tyler died in front of me and I chose to leave and forget everything. But this man

Giovanni Freniere lost his own mother and yet he tried to be a normal student at Montello High. And then he lost his youngest brother how did I expect him to react?

Ang akala ko, maayos mong nadadala ang lahat Mahina kong sabi. Hindi niya inaamin ang kahinaan niya. But whether he admits it or not, I was seeing a different side of him now.

Ngumiti siya ng mapakla. How could he manage a laugh so full of bitterness? I just want to leave, Summer Leondale. But why am I stopping for you? Tanong niya.

Am I Am I stopping you? Hindi ako makapaniwala sa isiping nagawa kong pigilan ang isang Van Freniere. Tila nagwawala ang konsensya ko. Parang lumatag sa harapan ko ang lahat ng pwedeng mangyari. Lahat ng masamang kahahantungan sa oras na ipinasok ko sa Montello High is Giovanni Freniere.

Get out of the car, matigas kong sabi. Ilang beses ba akong may papalayasin sa sasakyang ito. Nagtatakang lumingon siya sa akin. I will find another way to save Montello High, matigas kong dagdag. Subalit imbis na umalis ng sasakyan ay pinaandar niya itong muli. He gave me one of his annoying evil smirk. Uh, Crap. He was back to his normal self.

Maybe your stupid plans are worth watching, wika niya at pinasibad ang sasakayan.

Are you serious?! Protesta ko.

Well, for one, papayag akong magpagamit sa yo. Consider this as my birthday gift. A bomb on your conscience. I stared at him. It made my jaw drop. Not the bomb on my conscience remark but the birthday gift one. What was the date today?! It was seventeen! My birthday was today. How come I always forget my birthday?!

How how did you know?! Di ko napigilang itanong. It was really surprising na isang tulad ni Van Freniere ang magpapa-alala ng birthday ko.

We had you investigated before. It would come in handy if the mafia decided to put you in the Black list and kill you and your family, sagot niya. How could he talk about killing people like it was a normal thing to do?

Black list? Ulit ko. It didn t sound good. I remembered the night I had dinner in the mansion. I was sure I heard Tres and Algernon talk about it before Van dragged me to my room. Hindi siya sumagot. It must really be a classified information. What did Tres say? Let her hear this and she ll die. Nanatili na lang akong tahimik at pinanood ang paglapit ng sasakyan sa teritoryo ng Montello High. We were taking the entrance gate. Everything was now decided. There was no turning back.

Detective Penber would definitely take a legal action against me for carnapping his vintage Mustang. Dalawang kotse na ang naipapasok ko sa Montello . At pawang ang mga iyon ay hindi ko pag-ari. I think I was the worst delinquent that ever existed. Just barely before on my eighteenth year in life and I was able to do carnapping, kidnapping, illegal possession of firearms, harassing and trespassing. I was really awesome. Criminals must be really envious of me.

It was already dawn and dark. The school was still on its curfew period pero sigurado akong bubukas ang gate nito para sa amin. They would always welcome VIPs. Binigyan kami ng blangkong tingin ng mga gwardya na para bang kinakalkula nila kami. They always get these blank stares every night as if they weren t the school guards that they used to be. It was like someone was watching us through their eyes. Pinakawalan ko ang pinipigil na hininga nang magbukas ang gate at ipasok ni Van Freniere ang kotse.

If this won t work Hindi ko itinuloy ang sasabihin ko. I shouldn t even think about the possibility that our plan wouldn t work. Many lives depend on this. And also, this man as pawn. Everything should work out well. Ipinark ni Van ang Mustang sa tapat ng Girl s Dormitory. Lumabas ako ng kotse and waited for him to climb down. Inilahad ko ang palad ko sa kaniya. He just stared at me. Wala ba siyang balak ibalik sa akin ang susi ng Mustang?

You are supposed to give me the car keys, paalala ko sa kaniya kung sakaling nakalimutan niya.

Walang emosyon niyang tiningnan ang naghihintay kong kamay.
Kinamumuhian ko ang nagmamay-ari ng kotseng yan. Halos hindi nga ako makahinga dahil nariyan sa sasakyan ang nakakadiring amoy niya.

Kumunot ang noo ko. Hindi naman mabaho sa loob ng kotse. At isa pa, ito na yata ang trusted partner ko sa lahat ng mga suicidal missions na nangyayari sa akin. I was starting to adore this vintage car. Hey! It s a nice and cool car! I hate Penber but his Mustang is exceptionable, pagtatanggol ko sa kotse. Laking gulat ko ng sipain niya ito bilang sagot. Hey, you stupid !

Yeah, it s a nice and cool car. Perfect for bonfires. Tiningnan ko siya ng matalim.

I would never let you! Mukhang nadaragdagan ang listahan ng mga kailangan kong iligtas. He just shrugged and gave me a bored look. Inis akong naglakad patungo sa entrancing dorm subalit napatigil din nang mapansin ko ang pagsunod niya.

I don t need a pet dog, singhal ko sa kaniya.

I never needed a crazy kidnapper, mabilis niyang sagot. Inis ko siyang hinarap at humalukipkip.

So ano ng ibig mong sabihin? Tanong ko.

He started towards me. Tell Makki to clean my room. Throw away all the lacy underwear and protection that must have been left on the floor since I last stayed there. You can also tell him to get rid of the bitches he must be hiding inside our dormitory room. For now, I ll take your bed, wika niya at saka ako nilampasan papasok sa dormitory. I was left running with my jaw dropping on the floor. Ni hindi ko alam kung anong dapat maging reaksyon ko. Uh, inuutusan niya ba ako? Sinabi ba niyang kukunin niya ang higaan ko? What. The. Hell?!

Dali-dali akong tumakbo sa loob ng dormitoryo. It was dark at tanging ang malamlam lang na lampshade sa receiving area ang nagbibigay ng liwanag. Wala ring mg estudyante sa labas at mukhang lahat ay tulog na. I saw Van climbing silently on the stairs. He was walking without effort and without making any noise. Sneaky monster! Sinikap kong huwag gumawa ng kahit na anong kaluskos habang hinahabol siya. He was already at the door of my room when I got to him. Wala na akong nagawa nang walang seremonya

niyang buksan ang pinto at pumasok. I cursed silently before going in and closing the door behind us.

Naaabutan ko siyang nasa harap ng kama ko habang tila nananaginip na nakatulala naman sa kaniya sina Mirden at Jamie. They must have been waiting for me to come back this whole time.

Summer Leondale. Paano mo nagagawang matulog nang mahimbing sa ganito kaliit na espasyo? Tanong ni Van.

Hindi ko kailangan ng California King Sized Bed para matulog ng mahimbing at managinip, sarkastiko kong sagot. This freaking asshole was really getting on my nerves. Agad na lumapit sa akin si Jamie at Mirden nang mahimasmasan sila.

How did you get him? Agad na tanong ni Jamie.

Ganito ka kabilis tumrabaho? Ani Mirden.

Kung ikukwento ko sa kanila ang buong pangyayari, malamang ay hindi na kami matulog at abutin ng umaga. Isa pa, mukhang hindi na kakayanin ng pasensya ko ang magdetalye ng mga nangyari so I simply gave them the main bomb. I kidnapped him.

The look on their faces were priceless. Parang gusto kong kunan sila ng video at ipost sa youtube. Uh, yeah. We were so deprived of this out-of-reach internet. Daig pa namin ang pinagkaitan ng sibilisasyon.

You what? Marahang pagkukumpirma ni Mirden.

Walang ibang paraan. It s not like I can beg him to come with me. And I will never do that anyway, sagot ko. Hindi pa rin nabubura ang hindi makapaniwalang ekspresyon sa mga mukha nila. I sighed. Everything s about gangsters and mafia until it became nightmare on elm street.

Hey, Mirden. I ll take your bed. Magshare kayo ni Jamie Wala pang tatlong segundo matapos kong sabihin iyon ay dali-dali silang tumakbo sa kani-kanilang kama at saka humiga at nagkunwaring tulog. I rolled my eyes

at them. This was the point where everyone needs to save themselves. I walked grudgingly to my bed and sighed. This scene looked familiar.

I wondered if I will be able to sleep. The last time something like this happened, nagising naman akong buhay at buo ang pangangatawan. But I wasn t so sure now especially since I keep thinking back to the fact that I kissed him just a little while ago. D mn this guy!

Nahiga ako sa gilid ng kama at saka siya buong lakas na tinulak palayo. Subalit hindi siya natinag. Parang ako pa ngayon ang illegal na nakikitulog sa kama ko.

Screw you, kidnapper, nakapikit at inaantok ang boses niyang wika. What s with his husky, sleepy voice! Was he seducing someone?

Freddy Krueger, inis kong sagot at saka humiga patalikod sa kaniya. Jeez.

Aren t you supposed to take off your brassiere? Narinig kong wika niya. I tensed and blushed. I got up violently to give a retort but I heard Mirden speak.

This is so awkward, aniya.

Tell me about it, sagot ni Jamie.

Ugh! Shut up and sleep, you two! Sabay namang nagpanggap uling tulog ang dalawa. At ikaw, Van Freniere! This is my bed! And you are in my territory. So if I tell you to shut up, you should shut the f ck up!

I shivered when his eyes provocatively raked my body. D mn this guy! I was just wearing a tank top now that I ve tossed my jacket off.

You re already 18 and you re reaction is like that? You know I can undress you right now and then it will all be legal

Shut up! I cut him off kasabay nang narinig kong paghugot ng hininga ng dalawang nagpapanggap na tulog. Nilingon ko sila pero nagpapanggap pa rin silang tulog.

I was just making a point, Leondale, seryoso niyang sabi. His eyes were closed.

I was so tired of my escapade that I decided to drop it and just go back to my space on the bed. I wondered what will happen tomorrow.

Will our plans work?

I sighed before closing my eyes. I couldn t believe that this monster was here with me on my own freaking bed. And it was really hard to forget his presence behind me.

So, what if our plans won t work? What if the enemies are too big to destroy?

I guess the only choice I have for now is to sleep and face tomorrow. Well, it was definitely far from a good night.

I told you, you can t get away from me. Ang boses niyang muli ang narinig ko. Wow. Ambilis namang dumating ng panaginip. I let a smile curve on my lips.

Have no plans to run yet, I whispered.

It was definitely far from a good night.

Chapter 41: Poisoned

Author s Note:

For all the unrequited situations, for the memories to be forgotten, for the bravest and moving on, for those who drank the poison, for the hopeful. No regrets.

Siel Alstreim

Soundtrack: I Can t Make You Love Me Adele

I was so comfortable. It was probably one of my best sleeps. It was like my body was getting everything it needed to rejuvenate. And I didn t wanna wake up yet.

But something told me that I have to. May mali sa masarap na pakiramdam na nararanasan ko ngayon at hindi ko matandaan kung ano. Pinilit kong buksan ang aking mga mata. Maliwanag na at ganun pa rin ang silid na kinalalagyan ko. Napalingon ako sa kabilang bahagi ng kama ko. It was empty. But someone had been there. I could still smell his enchantingly manly scent wait! Bigla ang ginawa kong pagbangon, dahilan upang gumuhit ang kirot sa ulo ko. Masyado pang maaga pero sapat na ang liwanag para simulan ang araw na ito.

Nasaan na ang taong iyon?

Nagmamadali akong bumangon at nagtungo sa banyo upang maligo. Mahimbing pa rin ang tulog nina Jamie at Mirden nang matapos akong ayusin ang sarili ko. Jeez. For being a kidnapper, I was such a big time failure. Paano ako nagawang layasan ng biktima ko nang walang kamalay-malay? Not that I was planning to tie him in a chair. It was just that uh! I felt responsible for everything that was about to happen. And I had no idea where I would find him. Unang pumasok sa utak ko ang cafeteria. Malamang na naisip niyang simulan ang umaga. Kasama ng mainit na kape, ang malanding tagapagsilbi Oh sh t! Hindi ko siya masyadong nabigyan ng detalye tungkol sa Elixir of Life.

I ran towards the cafeteria. Halos mangilan-ngilan lang ang mga estudyanteng naglalakad sa paligid ng campus the early birds. I never thought I would be one of them. But, just this once! I crashed into the place like I just came from an important war of the millennium. Maybe not. It was actually like I wanted to start World War 3. Nakuha ko ang atensyon ng mangilan-ngilang estudyanteng nag-aalmusal. Nahagip ng paningin ko ang isang pares ng mga mata. Agad kong nilapitan ang nagmamay-ari nun. He just threw me a bored look. Nakita ko ang isang tasa ng walang bawas na kape sa harap niya. Kinuha ko iyon.

Don t drink it, wika ko.

He frowned at me. Sumugod ka rito para lang pigilan akong magkape? Arogante niyang sagot. He always got this thing going when he makes me feel like I was an idiot.

Yes. And you shouldn t really drink this coffee, matigas kong sagot. Nahagip ng paningin ko ang tila nabato-balaning reaksyon ng mga taong nakatingin sa amin. Tila hindi sila makapaniwala sa diskusyon namin. Ni hindi sila gumagalaw. It was like the world stopped to watch our nonsensical war.

You listen, woman! I usually drink five cups of coffee in a day. And I always make sure that it has less sugar. And now you re telling me not to drink coffee? Screw you! Give it back! At akma niyang kukunin. Inilayo ko iyon upang hindi niya na maabot.

No! You listen, jerk! I am telling you not to drink this coffee and you will not drink this coffee! Wika ko.

Ang lakas ng loob mo, Summer Leondale. Nakakalimutan mo na ba kung sino ang kausap mo? May pagbabantang tanong niya. I felt the chill of fear in my bones but I didn t let it consume me. Isang mabilis na hakbang ang ginawa ko at binuhos ang laman ng tasa sa pinakamalapit na paso ng halaman. I smirked at him as I put back the empty cup on his table. I watched as he stood and grabbed my arm.

Sinusubukan mo ba ang pasensya ko? Galit niyang tanong. Sasagot sana ako subalit isang kamay ang humawak sa kabila kong braso.

Let her go, Freniere, seryosong wika ng bagong dating. Nilingon ko si Jin na masamang nakatingin kay Van Freniere.

Van returned it with his evil smirk. And why would I do that? Naghahamon niyang sagot. Pinilit kong bawiin ang pareho kong braso subalit kahit isa sa kanila ay walang balak na bitawan ako. Jeez! Mukhang balak pa nila akong balian ng buto.

Kayong dalawa! Bitiwan niyo nga ako! Seryoso kong utos sa kanila. Subalit mukhang hindi nila iyon narinig. Patuloy sila sa pagsusukatan ng

tingin.

Maaga akong pumunta sa dorm mo para kumustahin ang kalagayan mo at siguraduhing ligtas ka. Mabuti na lang at nalaman ko kaagad na nasa panganib ka, wika ni Jin subalit hindi sa akin nakatingin.

Van smirked annoyingly. Have you ever heard the story about the moth which kept dancing near the fire? The moth was burned. And got killed. It turned to ash and faded in the air. It got the best ending, doesn t it? I rolled my eyes. Was he comparing me to a moth?

Jin returned his glare. Do you know one function of water? To kill fire, sagot niya.

I don t know that. I just usually drink it, Van remarked.

What was wrong with these idiots? Wow! Great! Everybody s watching us like we re some stupid love triangle scandal. Should I be proud of it? Komento ko. Doon ko naramdaman ang madiing paghawak ni Van sa braso ko at saka niya ako binitiwan.

Dream on, Leondale, wika ni Van at saka nagsimulang humakbang palayo. Subalit agad rin siyang napatigil at napako ang atensyon sa isang bagay. Napako rin ang paningin ng iba pang estudyante roon at tila hindi nila napigilang manggilalas sa nakita.

I gasped when I saw it and quickly walked towards it. Sumunod sa akin si Jin. Yung halaman na pinatapunan ko ng kape kanina, ngayon ay tila unti-unti nang nalalanta. Mapusyaw na ang kanina ay mabeberdeng dahon nito at kulubot na rin ang tangkay.

You just saved the bastard s life, wika ni Jin. Hindi ako makapaniwalang ganito kabilis kumilos ang mga taong iyon. Agad na nagkick-in ang adrenaline rush ko at agad na sumugod sa counter ng cafeteria. Bakas pa rin sa mukha ng mga nagpapalakad sa cafeteria ang pagkalito at pagkagulat sa nasaksihan. Niliban ko ang counter upang makapasok sa pinaka-kusina.

Nasaan ang tagapagsilbi? Tanong ko sa babaeng nakasagutan ko dahil sa pagtatanggol niya sa tagapagsilbing sinaktan ko. Mukha namang mayroon na siyang ideya kung bakit ko ginawa iyon.

K-kanina pa siya n-nawawala, sagot niya. Mukha namang handa siyang magbigay ng impormasyon.

Ano ng ginagawa niya rito? Tanong ko.

S-sa beverages siya. Sa milkshake, juices, at at coffee, sagot niya. I gritted my teeth in frustration. Sa lahat ng pwede niyang kalagyan, bakit sa mga inumin pa.

May ideya ba kayo sa ginagawa niya? Hindi sumagot ang mga nakarinig. Ang iba ay umiling . Mukhang wala silang alam.

Bago lang siya rito. Paborito siya ng mga bisita at ilang estudyante. Magaling din siya sa trabaho niya at masarap ang ginagawa niyang milkshake

Magaling siyang manlinlang, putol ko sa sinasabi ng namamahala sa cafeteria. Hindi na siya umimik. Mukhang alam na niyang may pagkakamali siya sa paghusga sa taong iyon.

Dispose everything she had made, utos ko.

Pero malulugi ang cafeteria

This is a crime with an intention of poisoning or drugging someone. Kung hindi niyo itatapon ang mga posibleng contaminated drinks, iisipin naming may kinalaman kayo sa nangyari, pahayag ko.

Don t throw it. Just keep them in a safe and secluded place. We can present them as evidence. Nilingon ko ang nagmamay-ari ng tinig. Mirden. She was eyeing everything carefully. Lumapit ako sa kaniya.

Mirden! Have you seen that dying plant? Tanong ko. Tumango siya. It was so fast! He he could have died like that!

Hey, Hey, Summer! Pagpapakalma niya sa akin. Hindi ko namalayan na unti-unti na pala akong nagpapanic. Bumibilis na rin ang tibok ng puso ko sa emosyong nararamdaman ko ngayon. Control your mind. Be calm, mahinang sabi ni Mirden. I frowned at her. It was so frustrating.
Remember kung gaano kabilis umepekto ang Elixir of Life? That was what happened to that plant, kalmado paliwanag niya.

She used it on beverages. Bakit hindi namatay ang mga estudyanteng nakagamit ng EOL? They were drugged at the ball, right? I asked. Now that the possibility of death was closer to us, I couldn t help but wonder and doubt. I shouldn t doubt, right?

She held my hand to calm me down. This is just a theory. Humans have an immunity system different from the plants. Our body has antibodies; we have the ability to fight the toxins that enter our bodies. Kaya hindi katulad ng sa halaman ay nagiging reaction ng Elixir of Life sa tao. But it was still a drug. Poisonous and active. Hindi ko alam kung hanggang saan tatagal ang immunity system ng tao kung na-overdosed ng EOL, paliwanag ni Mirden. So we still got time before we all got consumed. But it was too little time.
Isa pa, ang Elixir of Life ay hindi para sa mga halaman, dagdag ni Mirden. Bumuga ako ng hangin at saka marahang tumango.

You re lucky that you can play mind games. I guess that s the reason why you can t even throw a punch, biro ko sa kaniya. She smiled at me at saka kami lumabas mula sa kusina ng cafeteria. Naabutan naming nagkakagulo ang mga estudyante. Some students were throwing their beverages in a certain tank.

Wala kayong iinuming kahit ano maliban sa bottled and canned drinks. Nangingibabaw ang boses ng nag-uutos na iyon. I searched for that person and saw her standing on one of the cafeteria s desk. It was Jamie, bossing everyone around.

Since when did she get that Adolf Hitler s syndrome? Mahina kong sabi kay Mirden.

Since everything was messed up, sagot niya. We watched as everyone hurried to throw their drinks. Isang grupo ang nagmamadaling pumasok sa

cafeteria.

Can someone explain to me what is happening? Trinity demanded. Everyone stopped and looked at her. She was with the whole student council. Wow. She still got the talent to make us feel like we were the wrong ones. And she was the angel.

Unti-unti tayong nilalason. Narinig kong sagot ng isa.

She frowned. What are you talking about? And you, Throckmorton! Get down! Utos niya kay Jamie. Walang kumibo. It took five seconds bago kumilos si Ethan Montreal at lumakad palapit sa kinaroroonan ni Jamie. Inilahad niya ang kamay niya rito at walang pagdadalawang isip na tinanggap iyon ni Jamie. She was blushing while she stepped down through one of the chairs. She was actually acting like she was in some kind of a fairy tale and she was being helped by a prince. Crap! She was so freaking blushing! I gritted my teeth and shot her one of the deadliest glare.

Di mo siya masisisi, Summer. That s Ethan Montreal, komento ni Mirden sa reaksyon ko. Jeez! Mukhang tapatan ko lang siya ng gwapo, ibibigay niya ang walang limitasyong credit card niya.

Ipaliwanag mo ang kalokohang ito, Jamie Throckmorton, narinig kong sabi ni Trinity. Hindi sumagot si Jamie. Kunot ang noong lumapit ako sa kanila. Naramdaman kong sumunod sa akin si Mirden gayundin ang agad na paglapit ni Jin sa direksyon ko. The students made way for us.

Something big and destructive is happening here in your beloved school. And we have to do something to save ourselves, malakas kong sabi nang makalapit sa kanila.

Well, of course, you are here! You re the only one who can start chaotic scenes like this, pormal na wika ni Trinity.

Are you saying that I m the only person here with brains? I smiled at her sarcastically. She glared at me.

Miss Leondale, we need to maintain peace and order in this school kaya kung sinuman ang may pakana ng gulong ito, I m sorry, but we need to take legal actions, wika ni Ethan. He was addressing me formally. What can I expect from the vice president of the student council? He was always like that.

Kalmado akong humalukipkip sa harap niya. There s an illegal drug quietly circulating in this school. Unti-unti nitong nilalason ang mga estudyante. One of the service crew in this cafeteria had been putting it in our drinks. Now, tell me, hindi ba dapat iyon ang gawan niyo ng legal actions? Wika ko.

You don t have any proof, wika ni Trinity. Hindi ko siya pinansin. Nagpatuloy ako na kay Ethan lang nakatingin.

You can ask them. You can ask your friend. Muntik nang uminom si Van Freniere ng kape na merong droga. Bakas ang gulat sa mukha ni Ethan nang sabihin ko iyon. Sa wakas, nagkaroon din siya ng emosyon.

That was when Trinity grabbed my arm and turned me towards her.

Hey! Narinig kong babala ni Jin.

What did you say? He s here? Trinity asked me in a desperate voice. Her face looked pale and there was longing in her voice. Part of me wanted to understand her. Part of me wanted to give her a reassuring look.

Yes, he s here. Lumingon ako sa paligid para hanapin ang taong iyon. She did the same. Subalit wala ni anino ni Van Freniere kaming nakita.

Where is he? Nag-aalalang tanong ni Trinity.

He s here just a while ago, sagot ko habang patuloy na nagpapalinga-linga sa paligid. I watched her as she ran out of the cafeteria. She was going to find him. Hahakbang sana ako upang tumakbo at sumunod sa paghahanap subalit isang kamay ang pumihit sa braso ko. It was Jin. Seryoso niya akong tiningnan sa mata at saka umiling. Nakaramdam ako ng guilt sa inakto ko. I was in the middle of saving Montello High subalit

handa akong iwan ang lahat at hanapin ang taong iyon? Jeez! Why was I acting weird lately?

I will talk to Van after this. But Summer, this kind of act will cause the student body to panic. We re trying to avoid a false alarm here, wika ni Ethan. Hindi ako umimik. Napipikon na ako sa pagiging logical at based from books niya.

Naramdaman kong hinila ako ni Jin at siya ang humarap kay Ethan.
Whether it is a false alarm or not, we have to take precautionary measures. Now, kung walang gagawin ang student council rito, then I think kailangang kumilos ng mga estudyante for themselves, wika ni Jin.

We ll be advised by the school s management

Hey, you, nerdy! Sabihin mo sa kanila na ang mga bisitang iniisip nilang tutulong sa Montello High ang unti-unting lumalason sa atin! Sigaw ko sa tahimik na lalaking miyembro ng student council. Mukhang pinananatili niya ang kaniyang katahimikan upang hindi siya mapansin pero dahil doon, mas nakuha niya ang atensyon ko.

A uhm Hindi niya mapakaling anas. I stared at him darkly.

You should never answer like that to an impatient person! Mirden, pahiram ng ballpen, seryoso kong wika na ikinabahala niya.

Oo na! Oh, God! Oo na! Just don t stab my eyes! Namumutla niyang pag-amin. It got uncomfortable reactions from the students. It was a drug called EOL. Hindi ko alam na may balak pala silang pwersahin ang mga estudyante na gumamit. I thought it was just an underground business between outsiders and the students, paliwanag niya.

Natahimik ang lahat at waring pinoproseso ang katotohanan ng mga pangyayari. It must be a shock for most of them. They were probably gangsters but they were not drug users. Most of Montello High s students were decent people.

Summer, something s wrong, biglang wika ni Mirden. I looked at her questioningly. The bell. The school bell, wika niya. Kumunot ang noo ko. Naiisip pa niya ang pagiging late sa klase sa ganitong sitwasyon? She was so unbelievable.

It s okay to ruin your perfect attendance sometimes, sagot ko.

No. Hindi iyon ang ibig kong sabihin. The bell. It s not ringing. Dapat ay kanina pa iyong tumunog bilang hudyat ng pagsisimula ng klase, wika niya. I turned to Ethan who seemed to hear what we were talking about.

I ll check it. Keep everyone safe, wika ni Ethan. Mukhang naiintindihan na niya na kailangan nang kumilos. Pinanood namin siyang nagmamadaling lumabas ng cafeteria. Bakas sa mukha ng lahat ang pag-aalala.

I can t just stay here! Wika ko kay Jin. Hawak pa rin niya ang kamay ko.

Huminga siya ng malalim. Gusto mo bang hanapin ko siya para sa yo? Sinalubong ko ang tingin niya. His eyes were always so clear. And I could see that he was hurting. D mn! How could I hurt someone just by existing? Umiling ako sa tanong niya.

Keep them safe here. They can rely on you. Bumaling ako kay Jamie.
Jamie, stop daydreaming! Just keep things in order. Bumaling akong muli kay Jin. I will look for him. Dinala ko siya rito kaya responsibilidad ko siya. I hope you understand. Kailangan ko siyang hanapin.

Marahan siyang tumango. If you are going to stay beside me, I will do everything to keep you safe. But I can t make you stay, can I? I know I understand You have to go to him. Like you always do, seryosong sabi ni Jin. My chest felt tight. Uh! I wanted to stay. But I can t. Pinisil ko ang palad niya at saka ko binawi ang kamay ko.

I ll be back, malungkot kong sabi at saka tumakbo palabas ng cafeteria. Kinagat ko ang labi ko upang pigilan ang sobrang guilt na nararamdaman ko. Sometimes, it sucks to feel emotion. But that is what makes us human.

Nakarating ako sa hallway ng school. It was so silent at walang tao. Tsk. Nasaan na ba ang taong iyon? Why did he disappeared during this kind of situation? Sumilip ako sa ilang nadaraanan kong classrooms. Walang tao. Nasaan na ang lahat? Nagsimulang lumakas ang kaba sa dibdib ko. I felt more alone. Para akong nasa isang scene ng The Walking Dead. It was just that there was really no one here. Not even zombies.

Nakarinig ako ng boses sa tagong bahagi ng hallway. I ran towards it. I ran like it was the first light I could see in a dark tunnel. It was Trinity s voice. She must have seen him, then.

Thank you for coming back. I know you will always come back, narinig kong wika ni Trinity. I frowned. Her words stung me. The thought the he came back for her seemed to punch into my gut. Jeez! All this time, Trinity believed he will come back and I was the one who screamed the he never will. I was the stupid one to prove myself wrong.

But then, I was the one who brought him back so I think I had all the right to ruin this moment and steal him away. Like I always do.

Lumiko ako sa pinanggalingan ng boses ni Trinity. I was prepared for some stealing stunt subalit napatigil ako sa kinatatayuan ko. It was like cold water splashed over me. Nakayakap si Trinity kay Van at umiiyak. It was a perfect romantic reunion. And they were so freaking perfect for each other. Sabay nila akong napansin at lumingon sa akin. Trinity with her teary eyes and Van with his deadly, evil stare.

I I Uh, maling liko, wika ko at saka tumakbo palayo sa dalawa. I suddenly wish that no one was here, not even those two. Jeez! What the hell was this feeling? I hate that I saw them together. The last time I felt something like this It was with Lawrence and Autumn. But hell, why now?

Malapit na akong lumabas sa hallway nang maramdaman ko ang paghila sa braso ko at pagbaon ng syringe sa leeg ko. It was too fast. I couldn t speak. I couldn t move. Ni hindi ko naramdaman ang sarili kong nahuhulog sa sahig. All I could feel was the sting of the needle on my neck and the sleepiness. Pinilit kong buksan ang aking mata subalit kusa itong nagsasara. But before I finally lost consciousness, I caught a glimpse of the woman

taking the syringe off my neck. She was beautiful and white. And I know her. But I was wondering why Why?

 Doctor Charlotte Mitton I whispered weakly before everything turned black.

Chapter 42: Treachery

Author s Note:

For the queries about Dr. Charlotte Mitton, I will refer you to Chapter 12. Some things are unplanned. And I guess that s what makes life interesting.

And yeah, remember Makki s forlorn and unrequited love? Haha. Editor MUB asked for my permission and she was able to knock up and write his story and shed light on some secrets. You guys, it s wonderful. And if you are interested to know who Makki s unrequited is, you can read it through this link (http://www.wattpad.com/26371378-tadhana-makki%27s-story) or click that external link right there at the right side of your screen!

At oo nga pala, nasabi ko na ba ang mahilig akong magbasa? Haha. And that means, I m reading everything. As in everything. Every comment, messages and mentions. Haha. I can even read your mind. LOLs. Natatakot lang akong magreply. Haha. So forgive me and understand me. And thank you, guys! Thank you for the readers and writers who understand. Thank you for reading!

And lastly, about the metaphor of poison in the last chapter, it s something for you to unravel. You can go deep or you can just stay shallow. Thanks, sweeties! Or I ll feed your brains to the zombies!

Siel Alstreim

I could feel the pain. It was terrible. I thought it was the only thing I could feel at this moment but I was in a different kind of pain. It was destroying me from within. I couldn t move. Parang sinimento ang talukap ng aking mga mata. Napakahirap buksan subalit sinikap ko. Nauulinigan ko ang pag-

uusap ng mga boses sa paligid ko. Halos wala akong maintindihan sa mga sinasabi nila.

It s working on her effective

Kung ano man ang pinag-uusapan nila, it must be something about me. And I don t like it when someone is talking about me without my knowledge. But I think everyone is.

She s still not waking up, muli kong narinig. Pamilyar ang boses na iyon. Sinikap kong buksan muli ang aking mga mata. God. Tell me about the worst morning people. But it was still morning, right? Sa wakas ay nakagawa ng siwang ang aking mga mata upang makakita ng liwanag. Sa una, mukha lang pamilyar ang lugar na kinaroroonan ko. Ilang minuto ang lumipas bago ko napagtanto kung nasaan ako. Uh. How did I end up in the school s clinic? Wasn t I supposed to be the one sending people to this place? Saka ko naalala ang nangyari bago ako nawalan ng malay.

Trinity and Van together.

I was running away.

The syringe.

Dr. Charlotte Mitton.

Inilibot ko ang paningin ko sa paligid. Naaninag ko ang dalawang pamilyar na pigura na nag-uusap sa di-kalayuan. It was actually Dr. Charlotte Mitton. Pumasok muli sa isip ko ang katanungan bago ako mawalan ng malay. Bakit? Why her? Inilipat ko ang paningin ko sa taong kausap niya. Kung hindi lang ako paralisado ay baka napailing na ako. Hindi ako makapaniwala. Of all people, why these two?

Napansin nilang nakatingin ako sa kanila kaya agad nila akong nilapitan. My first instinct was to run. But how could I run when everything in me was hurting? Bahagi ba sila ng organisasyon? Parte ba ito ng plano?

The antidote is paralyzing her. Let s wait for a few more minutes, wika ni Dr. Mitton. Kumunot ang noo ko. Antidote? Was I poisoned?

She s strong and healthy. It will work, sagot ng isa. Gusto ko siyang sigawan. Gusto kong isumbat sa kaniya lahat ng sakit na nararamdaman ko. I felt betrayed. I was definitely mad subalit ang halu-halong emosyong iyon ay nagdulot lang ng isang patak ng luha.

Summer, I know it hurts. But, please, trust me, wika ni Mirden at saka niya tinuyo ng kamay niya ang nabasa kong pisngi. Trust her? After doing something to me without my consent? God! I trusted her! Ipinikit ko ang aking mga mata. Habang lumilipas ang minuto ay unti-unti ring nawawala ang sakit. Nagsimula sa paggalaw ang aking mga daliri, kasunod ang aking mga braso, mga binti hanggang sa maging normal na ang pakiramdam ng buo kong katawan. Mariin kong ipinikit ang aking mga mata dahil ang unang bagay na gusto kong gawin ay saktan sina Mirden Montgomery at Dr. Charlotte Mitton.

Summer, are you

I grabbed Mirden s arm violently. Masama ko siyang tiningnan. Ano sa tingin mo ang ginagawa mo? Kontrolado ang panggagalaiti kong tanong. I saw fear in her eyes immediately.

Para sa yo ang ginawa namin, nakangiwi niyang sagot. Mas hinigpitan ko pa ang hawak sa kaniyang braso.

Para sa akin? Nilolоko mo ba ako? I was losing my temper now.

Dr. Mitton tried to break my firm grasp. Leondale. You have to listen first. We re just helping you, kalmado niyang sabi.

Ibinaling ko sa kaniya ang masama kong tingin. I couldn t lose my temper. I should listen. I should think. I gritted my teeth at saka binitawan si Mirden. Tell me how you can explain a treachery, wika ko. Nakita ko ang pagmamarka ng kamay ko sa braso ni Mirden. I felt guilt but I couldn t do anything about it. I almost lost my temper.

You are forgetting one of the most important things in this situation, Summer. That is why we did it, wika ni Dr. Mitton.

I raised my eyebrows. Ano ng ibig mong sabihin?

You are their favorite test subject. That is the reason why they are not yet killing you, wika ni Mirden.

At ano ng kinalaman nito sa ginawa niyo? It s more like I m also your favorite test subject. Umiling siya.

It s an antidote. Elixir of Life is not just an illegal drug. It s also poisonous. It could weaken the cells and the immune system. Pinapahina nito ang nerves ng tao upang makontrol ang utak nito, paliwanag ni Dr. Mitton. I frowned. Here we go again with the details.

The antidote could strengthen your nerves. Halos kabaligtaran ito ng Elixir of Life. It makes everything more real. You will feel the pain as the price for stronger senses, wika ni Mirden.

You should have told me, angal ko pa rin sa ginawa nila.

We had to be careful. You were being observed. And you re busy. And pre-occupied, sagot niya.

Hindi ako sumagot. I was busy and pre-occupied. Ni hindi ko na nga naisip na protektahan ang sarili ko. I was busy saving the school. I was busy trying to save everyone. Should I be proud of myself? Should I consider it as one of my stupidity?

Sooner or later, it will happen. Makukuha ka muli nila and they will subject you to more tests on Elixir of Life. Hindi ko ina-assure that this antidote will save you. Ire-repel lang nito ang mga bad effects ng EOL sa human body. This is not going to save your life, Summer Leondale. It s just going to buy you time.

Parang markang tumatak sa utak ko ang mga sinabing ito ni Dr. Mitton. This is not going to save my life. Nothing could save me. All I have was

time. And it was all running out. Who said being a heroine would be easy?

Why are you doing this? Seryoso kong tanong kay Dr. Mitton. She fixed her glasses as if thinking of a proper answer. I think there was no proper answer but the real ones.

Because you are the daughter of Samuel Leondale, seryoso niya ring sagot na ikinabigla ko. Of course. Anak ako ng tatay ko. Pero anong kinalaman ni Daddy dito?

Pareho kami ng apelyido, sarkastiko kong sagot bilang pag-uudyok na magpaliwanag siya. Subalit mali yata ang naging approach ko dahil hindi na siya sumagot.

Hindi tayo pwedeng magtagal pa dito sa clinic, Summer, wika ni Mirden at saka inalalayan akong bumagon. Marami akong gustong itanong kay Dr. Mitton subalit mukhang hindi sapat ang oras na meron ako. Bago ko pa malaman ay nagmadadali na kami ni Mirden sa pintuan ng clinic. Tumigil ako at lumingon sa school doctor namin.

Bukod kay Samuel Leodale, bakit mo ito ginagawa? Tanong ko.

She gave me a faint smile. I guess we share the same reasons, tipid niyang sagot at saka ako hinila ni Mirden palabas ng clinic.

The school hallway was still empty. Ganun pa rin ang hitsura nito noong tumakbo ako kanina. It was deserted and I wondered if there were people lurking in those shadows, ready to attack us. Naalala ko rin ang senaryo bago ako nawalan ng malay. Gusto kong batukan ang sarili ko. If I was just paying attention then I wouldn t be caught off guard. Naiinis ako sa reaksyon ko. Naiinis ako kasi hanggang ngayon, naiisip ko pa rin kung magkasama sila. Well, maybe, normal ang nararamdaman ko. I was his kidnapper. I captured him. I should be controlling him.

Gaano katagal akong walang malay? Tanong ko kay Mirden.

Four hours, wika niya. I m so sorry, Summer, dagdag ni Mirden. Napipikon pa rin ako sa ginawa nila pero hindi na ganun katindi ang

negatibong emosyon ko para sa kaniya.

I still don t understand, pormal kong sabi habang maingat at mabilis kaming tumatakbo sa hallway.

Alam nating pareho kung gaano kasama ang Elixir of Life. After everything that happened, nahihirapan akong magtiwala sa kahit kanino. I couldn t trust Jin. I couldn t even trust Jamie. And I was doubting if I could trust you, wika ni Mirden.

Napatigil ako at hinarap siya. Naiintindihan ko ang trust issues niya. I ve been in that place for many years until it gave me no choice but to learn how to trust.

I heard what you said while I was paralyzed. How could you tell me to trust you when you couldn t trust me yourself? Tanong ko. Hindi siya kumibo. I knew from the way she breathe that she was ready to cry. Hindi ko naman siya masisisi, eh. Aminado naman ako na hindi ako consistent sa lakas ng loob ko. Maybe she got reasons not to trust me. Huminga ako ng malalim at saka hinawakan siya sa balikat.

Palalagpasin ko ang ginawa mo, Mirden. Hindi kita babalian ng buto dahil sa ginawa mo. But don t ever do it again. I have reasons not to trust you, too. But I will still trust you. It s funny but I believe in you, bitch, seryoso at pinal kong sabi at saka muling tumakbo. Naramdaman ko rin syang sumunod. Wala akong sapat na oras para magbigay ng rason kung bakit pagkakatiwalaan ko o hindi ang isang tao. I guess, I would just trust my instincts.

Malapit na kaming makalabas ng Montello High main building nang bigla kaming mapahinto ni Mirden dahil sa nasa daanan namin. Nasa pitong estudyante ang nakatayo sa daraanan namin at blangko ang mga matang nakatingin sa amin. I recognized one of them as Cattleya. She should be giving me sharp stares and mean words subalit walang ekspresyon sa mukha niya katulad ng iba pang kasama niyang estudyante. That was when I knew that everything was going to turn worse… starting now.

Summer, we can t go back, narinig kong sabi ni Mirden.

I know, sagot ko at saka sabay kaming tumakbo paabante. We have to go through them. Maayos na nakalagpas si Mirden subalit mukhang ako ang pakay nila. Their hands grabbed me. Mukhang wala akong pagpipilian kundi ang lumaban. I started to throw punches at agad kong napabagsak ang tatlong pinakamahina. Ito ang violent act na sigurado akong hindi ko pagbabayaran sa detention room. This was bitching around for free. At hindi ko mapigilang hindi ma-guilty sa ginagawa ko. I think I would prefer detention-based violence. At least yun, sigurado akong nararapat lang sa taong iyon ang makaranas ng attitude ko. Uh. But those students, they were innocent. Damn that EOL!

Agad akong tumakbo nang makawala ako sa ibang humahawak sa akin. Subalit just when Mirden and I were going to run, Cattleya grabbed my arm violently. Nilingon ko siya and she still got a blank face. Ah, nice to see you again, Cattleya, I said at saka ko siya sinuntok sa sikmura. Pinakawalan niya ako at saka namin pinagpatuloy ni Mirden ang pagtakas. I gritted my teeth. I freaking hate that stone organization. Paano nila nagagawang gamitin ang mga inosenteng estudyante?

Go to hell, Stones! Sigaw ko na umalingawngaw sa hallway ng building bago kami nakalabas. We sprinted across the yard towards the cafeteria. Wala akong nakikitang estudyante sa labas and that was what made it creepier.

They are like Zombies, humihingal na komento ni Mirden habang tumatakbo.

Yeah. Let s wait for them to eat our brains! Sagot ko.

Muli kaming nagkatinginan nang makita namin kung sino ang nasa labas ng cafeteria. He was just standing and staring at the place but not moving towards it. Ano ba ng iniisip niya at hindi pa siya pumapasok? Binilisan ko pa ang pagtakbo palapit sa taong iyon.

Summer, wait! Narinig kong sabi ni Mirden. But I was fast and close to him already.

Let s go, Makki! Wika ko kasabay ng pagtapik sa kaniyang balikat. Nagulat ako nang hawakan niya ang kamay ko nang mahigpit at saka siya humarap sa akin. I paled when I saw his blank face. Bakit pati siya?

Let her go! Mirden screamed as she tackled Makki s muscled body. Subalit tila wala iyong epekto. Para ngang hindi niya nakikita si Mirden. And the freaking thing was that he can only see me.

I slapped his face hard. Wake up, Makki! But he didn t flinch. That was when he started to drag me. Mirden was trying to pull me away from him while I was throwing punches. I couldn t help but roll my eyes. If only Mirden could throw punches.

Ilang hakbang na ang nailalayo namin sa cafeteria. This was not getting any better. Kahit pagsamahin namin ni Mirden ang mga lakas namin, wala pa ring nangyayari. Ano bang inaasahan ko? This was Makki Sison. A Black Government bad-ass gangster. Muscled with six-packed abs. How the hell can this get any better?

Malapit na akong sumuko sa pagpalag at panlalaban ng isang kamay ang pumigil sa balikat ni Makki at iniharap ito sa bagong dating. Bago pa ako muling makakurap ay dumapo na ang kamao nito sa panga ni Makki. Makki seemed to be caught off-guard but he didn t do something to defend himself. He was just staring like a surprised, emotionless robot. How ironic. Muling lumipad ang kamao ng aking tagapagligtas na naging dahilan nang walang malay na pagbagsak ni Makki sa lupa at mabitawan ako.

I m enjoying this, wika ni Zach habang hinihimas ang kaniyang kamao.

Nice punch. Bago matapos ang kaguluhang ito, kailangan mong matutong sumuntok, Mirden, komento ko at saka dinaluhan si Makki.

“But I can explain everything about project EOL! Depensa niya. Jeez. That was the other way of saying that I couldn t explain the elixir of life.

Dalhin natin siya sa cafeteria, wika ni Zach at saka tinulungan akong buhatin si Makki. Lakad-takbo ang ginawa namin upang mapabilis na makarating sa cafeteria. Someone opened the door for us and closed it

immediately after we got in. Bago ko pa maipasa si Makki sa ibang estudyante ay isang pares na agad ng kamay ang humatak sa akin at kinulong ako sa mga bisig nito. I was crushed into Jin s muscled chest.

Good God, Summer! What took you so long? Narinig kong wika niya.

I told you, babalik ako, Mahina kong sagot subalit hindi niya ako pinakawalan. Mahigpit pa rin niya akong yakap. Atubili kong inilagay ang kamay ko sa likod niya. Did I really worry you? Tanong ko. Hindi siya sumagot. He just buried his face in my hair. Maybe he was really serious about me. Maybe I didn t deserve it. But what should I do if I have now with me? It still felt good to have someone worry for you.

So, this bastard is drugged?

Dahan-dahan akong kumalas kay Jin nang marinig ko ang tinig na iyon. Sabay kaming lumingon sa nagmamay-ari ng boses. He s here.

Van, naisatinig ko. He stared back at me. And then I felt that vague feeling again. I hate it. I hate that I saw him with Trinity. I hate that he didn t come looking for me. I hate that he s different from Jin. I hate to feel this nonsensical thing.

Leondale, sagot niya at saka tiningnan muli si Makki.

That jerk, narinig kong komento ni Jin at bago ko pa napigilan ang sarili ko ay lumabas na sa bibig ko ang pinakawalang kwentang tanong.

Why? Why were you with her?!

Chapter 43: Ground Zero

Author’s Note:

So I wrote this chapter right after I recovered from my sickness—because I never want to disappoint you, guys and being sick was enough. I didn’t want to share the bad perks of having it. Haha! And urinary tract infection and blood infection are bitches! They just ruined my “Having A Coke With You” moments. Before I rant about every nonsensical things in my mind, I

want to thank all those people who wished me well! I got tons of “Get Well Soons” here and I really appreciate that. And for all the prayers, they’re just so powerful! Thank God I’m okay now.

(Editor: You guys, you have no idea how nonsensical Siel was when she was sick. I literally wanted to just smack her upside in the head!)

And guys, pray for our country, too. Ngayon ko lang na-realize how selfish I was when I was down with sickness. I was like, ‘This is horrible… I feel terrible… Oh no! I don’t wanna see a doctor (unless he is handsome)... Oh God, it’s blood… I’ll faint! No, I think I’ll die…’ So while I was being like that with myself, some people are suffering because of the recent typhoon we had and the recent 7.2 magnitude earthquake our country had experienced. Imagine kung gaano kababaw yung worries ko compared sa iba. So I’m praying now for them. I’m praying for all of us. Wherever you are right now, know that I’m thinking of your safety so be freaking safe always. Whoever you are reading this, I’m sincerely praying for you.. Well, gangsters are good prayer warriors, too, right?

So there! It’s already long. Enjoy this one!

Soundtrack: Come Home by One Republic ft. Sara Bareilles

Getting better and praying,

Siel Alstreim

I mentally murdered myself. I punched this sweet little mouth of mine, knocked myself out and buried my own unconscious body under the cold ground where all the creepy worms would definitely infest me. Oh, God! Tell me he didn’t hear that!

Subalit sobrang tahimik ng lahat at wala man lang nagtatangkang magsalita. Pinalipat-lipat lang nila ang kanilang mga paningin sa aming dalawa ni Van. Jeez, akala ko nung pumasok ako sa Arturia, sobrang talino ko na. How could I be so stupid?

“Should I be with you then?” Sarkastikong balik-tanong ni Van. And so my stupid question backfired on me like a ricochet. For a moment, I was tempted to say, ‘Yes! You should be with me!’ pero ayokong dagdagan ang katangahan ko.

“You are risking everything! Hindi kita dinala rito para makipagflirt sa Student Council President. You are here because—”

“I know, Leondale. I’m here because you f cking need a bait for your f cking stupid plans and I’m the chosen f cking one that fits that job perfectly!” Putol niya sa sinasabi ko. What’s with the cussing! I glared at him, he gave me his deadly glare, too. Jeez. Ako na yata ang pinakawalang kwetang kidnapper sa kasaysayan. I should have tied him up on a chair. I was his kidnapper and he was the victim. But couldn’t he just act like one?

Naramdaman ko ang paghawak ng kamay sa braso ko kung kaya’t naputol ang masamang pagtitinginan namin ni Van Freniere. Si Jin ang nalingunan ko and I suddenly felt guilty. Nakalimutan ko ang mga tao sa paligid ko. Nakalimutan ko ang sitwasyon. Why do I always get lost in those dark eyes? I almost forgot everything! Ngayon ko lang napansin na kaunti lang ang mga nadagdag na estudyante sa cafeteria mula nang iwan ko ito kaninang umaga. The whole student council wasn’t here, as well as more than half of the students of Montello High. Mukhang hindi lalagpas sa singkwenta ang mga narito kabilang na ang mga namamahala sa cafeteria. Everyone looked weary and scared.

“Gusto kong malaman kung ano’ng nangyari. I almost ran out nung nakita kong dumating ang Freniere na iyon nang hindi ka kasama,” seryosong sabi ni Jin, habang bahagya akong inilalayo sa kumpol ng mga tao at kay Van Freniere.

I sighed. This thing with him shouldn’t continue. Hindi niya dapat maramdaman ang ganitong bagay. I should deal with him after I deal with everything.

“Our sweet Mirden here and the school’s resident physician, Dr. Charlotte Mitton, injected something on me that caused me to pass out. They’re really a pain in the neck,” sagot ko. Jin frowned and he gave Mirden a sharp look.

“No, it’s not like that,” paliwanag ko. “They actually injected me with an antidote. More like a vaccine or protection from EOL. But heck, it’s really painful.” Kinapa ko ang leeg ko. Nahagip ng paningin ko si Van, glaring at us. It was deadlier this time, like he wanted to rip our heads off. I returned his glare with the same amount of animosity. That was when I felt Jin’s lips on my neck and was surprised. I tore my eyes away from Van.

Namimilog ang mga matang tiningnan ko si Jin. What the heck? “It’s a seal. It will make the antidote more powerful and effective,” nakangiting sabi niya.

“Jeez! No need to do that! Your dirty saliva might cause an infection. This is an open wound, you know!” Reklamo ko. He just smirked at me.

“That’s for making me so worried!” He answered playfully. Well, ano nga ba ang problema don? Dahil ba sa isang tao lang ang natatandaan kong humalik sa leeg ko? Well, aside from that acidic mouth of Tres!

Jin was still smirking like an idiot kung kaya’t sinuklian ko rin ang ngiti niya. Subalit agad ring nasira ang atmosphere ng camaraderie nang isang mabilis na pigura ang dumaan at humatak sa braso ko. D mn! How can he be so fast?

“We’re gonna discuss something, ass-face,” wika ni Van kay Jin habang hatak-hatak ako palayo papunta sa dulo ng cafeteria. Agad ring nakabawi si Jin at mabilis na humabol. Nagawa niyang hawakan ang kabilang braso ko.

“Like I would let you take her, flat-ass,” sagot ni Jin.

I frowned. What’s with their degrading asses? Parang kaninang umaga lang ganito rin ang sitwasyon namin. Subalit mas hinigpitan ni Van ang kapit sa braso ko at malakas akong hinila palapit sa kaniya. I gritted my teeth. That arm was the same arm that Makki just grabbed minutes earlier. Kaunting hila pa at baka maging si Sally ng Nightmare before Christmas na ako—detachable arms.

“I said, we’re going to discuss something,” pagdidiin ni Van.

Hindi na ako nakatiis. “Jin, I can handle this,” wika ko. I saw the hurt in his eyes but then he glared at Van.

“Pupuntahan ko lang si Zach. Sumigaw ka lang kapag kailangan mo ako,” wika niya at saka pinakawalan ang braso ko.

Hindi nag-aksaya ng oras si Van at muli akong hinila patungo sa bakanteng mesa sa dulo. “Let go! Namamanhid na yung braso ko!” Inis kong reklamo. Hindi siya sumagot at hindi niya ako binitawan. Subalit hindi na ganun kahigpit ang pagkakahawak niya sa braso ko tulad kanina. He almost threw me on the vacant chair and sat across me.

“So what are we going to discuss about?” Tanong ko na binigyang diin ang salitang ‘discuss.’ Hindi siya agad sumagot at masama lang akong tiningnan. Ginantihan ko ang masama niyang tingin. But I was a little distracted by his face. And I ended up just staring at his face. God! Why did he have to be so freaking handsome?!

“Saang impyerno ka pumunta kanina?” Pigil ang galit sa boses na tanong ni Van. I frowned in confusion.

“Sa Montello Main building. And as if you weren’t there, busy banging Trinity Domingo,” sarkastiko kong sagot. Para naman kasing hindi niya alam kung saan ako galing kanina. Eh, obviously, nandoon siya at nakita niya ako. Okay, correction, nakita niya ako at masamang tingin lang ang ibinigay niya sa akin.

“Where the hell did you run to?” Mas mataas ang boses at tila nauubusan ng pasensyang tanong ni Van.

“Hindi mo kailangang sumigaw! Jerk!” Reklamo ko. Hindi siya sumagot. Ikinuyom lang niya ang kamao niya sa mesa at tiningnan ako sa mata. Okay, this was way worse. I think it was better for him to shout his frustration. “Fine! Dr. Mitton caught me and injected me with something. Dinala nila ako ni Mirden sa school clinic. They said it was an antidote for the poison.” Bahagya akong nag-alangan. “Mirden thinks… she believes that sooner or later ay makukuha pa rin ako ng organisasyon and having injected that antidote in my system will at least give me time.”

He frowned at nawala ang tila napipikong ekspresyon sa mukha niya. He suddenly became serious. Like deadly serious. He seemed to be thinking of something and I wonder what was going on his mind.

Isang bagay ang sumagi sa isip ko. Knowing me, without holding it in, I voiced it out. “Do you know something about Charlotte Mitton?” Tanong ko. He looked at me like I’m some kind of an alien saying incomprehensible words. “Well, she mentioned my dad,” I felt compelled to add. Hindi ko inaasahan ang lungkot sa boses ko. Maski ako ay nabigla. Tsk. Sa lahat ng nangyayari ngayon, bakit sa ganitong panahon pa ako piniling paglaruan ng emosyon ko? “Forget it. It’s maybe nothing—” Pagbubura ko sa tanong subalit muling nagsalita si Van. Hindi siya nakatingin sa akin subalit alam kong ako ang kinakausap niya.

“She’s the school’s resident doctor for years now. I don’t know much about her. But maybe we can trust her.”

Tatlong pangungusap. Tatlong maiikling pangungusap ang sagot niya sa magulo kong utak. But why did that seem enough? It was like I was agreeing with him that I could really trust Dr. Charlotte Mitton, like I was just waiting for him to approve of Dr. Mitton as someone we can trust.

“About kanina—”

“Listen, Leondale. Don’t go anywhere because it’s too dangerous. Don’t do things like there’s someone out there to save you. Because there won’t be anyone here who can save you from what’s coming.” Bumalik ang iritableng tono ni Van nang mabanggit ang tungkol kanina. Wow! He could change emotions in just milliseconds. He’s really not human.

“There is someone who will save me!” May diin kong sagot.

“Who? Your stupid boyfriend?” I frowned. Was he talking about Jin? But he’s not my boyfriend.

“Look, if you’re thinking that—”

“Just shut up, Summer!” And he cut me off again. Why was he always cutting me off? Hindi na ako nagsalita pa at tahimik na lang na naupo sa harap niya. Hindi na rin siya muling nagsalita. He was looking everywhere but me. It was like he was thinking of something that was too far away from this mess. He might be thinking of the mansion, for all I know. He might be thinking of home. Hindi ko mapigilang hind makaramdam ng lungkot. The safety of home. Kamusta na kaya sina Mama and Daddy? Si Autumn? Are they thinking of me? They must be freaking worried.

“I’m sorry. They must be really worried.” Basag ko sa katahimikan namin. Kunot-noong ibinaling niya ang paningin sa akin. “Algernon Freniere. Sebastian Freniere. Your family made in hell,” paglilinaw ko. He looked amused. What? They never worried?

“It’s like saying they worried about the climate change,” mahina niyang sabi kasabay ang pag-iling. Now, I wonder what thing could make a Freniere really worried. I wanted to push this conversation more subalit malakas na tinig ni Zach Martinia ang kumuha ng aming atensyon. Kasama niyang nakatayo sa pinagsama-samang mesa sina Mirden at Jamie. Jin was just on the ground making sure that everything was in place while occassionally checking on me.

“Your student council can’t help us dahil kahit sila ay naduduwag at nagtatalo-talo sa Student Council Office. But if you’re worried about them, well, I assure you that they’re safe… for now,” anunsyo ni Zach. Walang sumagot. Everyone breathed Zach’s every word in as if lahat ng impormasyong ibinibigay ni Zach ang susi para mabuhay. So that was why he was outside earlier. Para mangalap ng impormasyon.

“And for the others… I found them. But they are not themselves. They are like… zombies. They wouldn’t recognize you. They could attack you. But don’t worry, they are not after your brains,” dagdag ni Zach. That got a reaction from the crowd.

“What the hell is happening?” Tanong ng isang naka-cheerleader ng uniform. She seemed shocked and terrified of what was happening. Halo-halo ang estudyante sa cafeteria. You have the prom queens, math and science whiz, the athletes and the normal run of the mill students. But there

was one thing common with them. They were all early birds. Sila ang mga nasa cafeteria simula pa kaninang umaga. Early-bird gangsters?

“Montello High School is being invaded by an illegal organization. They are using drugs on the students. At hindi ko alam kung maswerte tayong mga narito sa cafeteria because we are the one’s they can’t use. We are the good students stupid enough to wake up early today and avoid drinking that drug. Gusto kong idagdag na tayo ang mga nakaligtas. But hell, we are not yet survivors. If it’s not obvious to you then play some computer games once you survive this mess,” wika ni Zach. Hindi nawawala ang note of sarcasm in his voice. I guess we can never take that away from him.

“Why are they doing this to us?” Umiiyak na tanong ng isang nakasalamin na estudyanteng babae. She made Mirden looked like Wonder Woman.

Mukhang hindi naman mag-aaksaya ng panahon si Zach upang bigyan ng comforting words ang mga estudyanteng tulad niya dahil ang tangi niyang sagot ay, “Ask them.”

“So the moron is in-charged now,” mahinang komento ni Van. Nilingon ko siya at saka umiling.

“Huwag mong sabihing iniisip mo pa rin ang alitan ng Black Government at Dark Monarch sa ganitong sitwasyon?” Di-makapaniwala kong sabi.

“Should we become best friends because of this?” Sarkastiko niyang tanong.

“At least he’s a better leader compared to your student council president,” inis kong sabi. Hindi niya pinansin ang huli kong sinabi at tumingin lang sa ibang direksyon at hindi na muling nagsalita. Masama ko siyang tiningnan bago tumayo at pumunta sa kinaroroonan nila Mirden. Zach and Jamie, as well as Jin were informing everybody about what to do to survive.

“Zach is handling these students well,” wika ni Mirden na bumaba sa makeshift na stage at lumapit sa tabi ko.

“Yeah. Compared to that bastard’s bitch,” sagot ko at masamang nilingon si Van. He was still staring at nothing. Probably deep in his thoughts.

Mirden chuckled beside me and I glared at her. “Are you jealous?” She asked. I frowned. Jeez! Of course, she knew my running scene at the main building just a while ago.

“I’m not jealous! I’m just on a killing mode and she’s the lucky girl who’s head I wanna chop off!” I snapped at her.

“So you we’re just on a running mode that time?” Tanong niya.

Ibinaling ko ang masama kong tingin sa kaniya. Why was everyone reminding me of how stupid I was a few hours ago? “Look, Mirden, I don’t know why I’m acting this way. I’m so confused right now and your teasing is definitely not helping!” Kontrolado ang boses kong sabi. Tumango-tango lang siya habang nakangiti sa akin. Mukhang hindi niya inaalintana ang delikadong pagbabago ng temper ko. “Naghahanap ka ba ng sakit ng katawan?” Inis kong tanong.

“Are you hungry? It’s already past lunch,” sa halip ay wika ni Mirden. And of course, I was so freaking hungry. After all the tensions, I would definitely need food. Isa pa, nakakatulong ang pagkain sa akin to ease my temper.

“I’m not!” I snapped at nagpakawala siya ng tawa.

“You can ask the good lady behind the counter to give you some food,” wika niya. I rolled my eyes on her at saka dumiretso sa counter.

The day continued with tensions and worries. May mga panahong nakakabingi ang bulungan ng lahat. They must be talking about the things happening outside the cafeteria. At sa gitna ng kaguluhang ito, I think that being stuck on this place was actually good. Well, mainly because it was the source of food. A base. Our ground zero. But now that the darkness was approaching, I couldn’t help but wonder what will happen next. Mukhang ganun rin ang lahat. Dahil unti-unting napapalitan ng nakakabinging katahimikan ang mga pumapanaw na bulungan. Mas nakakabaliw.

I was just sitting on the floor with Jin beside me. Sa bilang ng mga estudyanteng narito ngayon, imposibleng magkasya ang mga upuan sa bawat mesa para sa aming lahat. It was not a big place but it could still be the safest and most convenient that we could get. Ever since the incident of the gunshots and Mirden's kidnapping, pinalitan nila ng bullet-proof glass ang nabasag na dingding. It was not like I was expecting some gun shots but the heck! Who would know if they got plans on murdering us?

"Don't think too much," wika ni Jin sa tabi ko at hinawakan ako sa tuhod. I didn't know why or how but that was comforting. I didn't want to take him for granted but having him near me was just so comfortable.

"At least, we're not worrying about exams," sagot ko and he chuckled. He could really be the perfect boyfriend. Someday, he will find the right one for him.

"I never worried about the final exams," sagot niya. I rolled mye eyes at him. How could some kids be so d mn good in classes without even moving a finger or effort to study? "Hindi ka ba nagsisisi na bumalik ka rito?" Tanong niya. I looked at him.

"Marami akong bagay na nagawa na dapat kong pagsisihan. But going back here? Wala akong maramdaman na kahit katiting na pagsisisi," sagot ko.

Ngumiti siya sa akin at seryosong sinabi, "I love this school. I'm only doing this because of two reasons: I want to save this school and I want to protect you." I knew he was telling the truth. He had the chance to escape on the Nightwoods but he chose to stay.

"I know we both want to save this school but you don't have to protect me __"

"Just let me, Summer. Please," sabi niya at hindi na ako muling sumagot pa. I just let him. Maybe this was the best thing I could do for him.

Nagdidilim na and Makki was still sleeping. Elixir of Life could really make you as dead as a corpse. Live as a walking dead, too. Tsk. Alas siyete ng gabi nang mag-umpisang mamahagi sina Jamie at ang babaeng

nakacheerleading uniform ng dinner. She seemed to be taking this situation seriously. She was probably one of those cheerleaders who doesn't flirt. Mirden handed us two bottled waters and a couple of big muffins.

"Sorry for the monster inside you, Summer, but we're trying to budget the food. Hindi natin alam kung hanggang kailan ito magtatagal. But the cafeteria staff are trying their best to feed us," malumanay na wika ni Mirden at saka umupo sa tabi ko. Tama siya. Hindi namin alam kung hanggang kailan ang lahat ng ito tatagal. Kung hanggang kailan kami lahat tatagal.

We were in the midst of eating our dinner silently nang puma-ilanlang ang boses ni Van. "Turn off all the lights now," malakas niyang pahayag. I frowned.

"What's wrong with him?" Komento ni Jin sa tabi ko subalit nahagip ng paningin ko si Zach na pumunta sa kinaroroonan ng switch at ilang sandali pa ay nagdilim ang paligid.

"Remain calm. Kung meron kayong katabi na nagpapanic, keep him or her calm or punch the kid," wika ni Zach. Okay, he was an awesome leader but he was harsh, too.

Maliwanag sa labas at unti-unting nag-adjust ang paningin namin sa liwanag na tumatagos sa salamin. It was a full moon, too and it was enough to see eveything in the cafeteria under a dim light. Well, aside for those with problems with their vision.

Van was standing, staring through the glass walls as Zach approached him. And I saw that their expression were both frozen and shocked. Tinulungan kami ni Mirden na makatayo ni Jin at dali-dali kaming nagtungo sa kinaroroonan nina Zach at Van. Sinundan ko ang tingin nila at hindi ko napigilan ang takot na bumalot sa buo kong katawan nang makita kung ano ang nasa labas. I felt Mirden grasp my arm. Walang nagsalita sa amin habang tinitingnan kung ano ang nasa labas ng cafeteria. I heard gasps from the students behind us who also started seeing what we were seeing. Kung maliwanag sa loob ng cafeteria ay hindi namin mapapansin ang eksenang

nasa madilim na paligid nito. Van had a sharp eye at napansin niya ito at agad na ipinapatay ang ilaw.

Montello High School had more than two hundred students. Almost one-fourth is inside the cafeteria with us. And the rest? They were outside, staring and watching the cafeteria blankly. Nakatingin lang sila at walang ekspresyon ang mukha.

They were watching us. Someone was watching us through them.

Soundtrack for this chapter: When A Heart Breaks – Ben Rector

Siel Alstreim

Chapter 44: Under the Moonlight

Sa simula pa lang, alam kong hindi lang isang ordinaryong paaralan ang Montello High School. Nakikita ko ang angas ng bawat estudyante sa tuwing titingnan sila sa kanilang mga mata. Naroon din ang ideya na hindi mo basta-basta mababali ang mga pinaniniwalaan nila. The victorian-styled school held the strength that matched its students' fierceness. It was like it will never fall down. Instead, it was offering a challenge to enter and get lost. Well, in my case, I totally got lost. And by being lost I think I found myself. And just when I found myself, these rude people were trying to ruin it. And they were starting with the students.

Nakatitig lang sila sa cafeteria. Malamang kanina ay nakikita nila ang bawat kilos namin. Subalit ngayon ay nakapatay ang lahat ng ilaw sa loob, mas sila ang malinaw naming nakikita.

"They are creepy," mahinang sabi ng isa sa mga estudyante na nasa likod ko. Yes, they really were. The scenario reminded me of one of those creepy zombie movies. It was just that these guys outside, they were just staring. They were not moving or even doing any violent thing. They were definitely not after our brains. They were controlled and that was what made it creepier.

Wala nang muling nagsalita sa amin. Kahit ang mga paghinga namin ay pigil. Tila nakikipagtitigan rin kami sa mga tao sa labas… sa ilalim ng liwanag ng bilog na buwan. Mula sa nakatayong kumpol ng mga estudyante sa labas ay may kumilos na isang pigura tungo sa unahan, malapit sa entrance ng cafeteria. He was holding something like some kind of device. He was staring intently at us, like he could actually see us through the darkness of the cafeteria. But he couldn't really see us, could he? And by the lights of the moonlight, I thought I saw him smile. It was a malicious smile though and… well, there was something familiar about him. Although I couldn't recognize him as any one I know.

Van's response was immediate. In just a swift moment, he was already in front of me. What the hell! What was happening now?

"Oh my God! He looks like Andrew!" Mirden gasped beside me. And that was when it occured to me. Kung gayon ay iyon ang dahilan kung bakit siya pamilyar. May kahawig siya. He was from the Novou clan, the family who killed every woman in the Freniere family. Well, two women… but still…

"Is that Andrew's brother?"

"Iniisip ba niyang kasalanan natin kung bakit namatay si Andrew?"

"That dude is taking revenge on us!"

"He's an idiot freak!"

Maraming mahihinang komento ang pumailanlang sa paligid. They were all whispers. They were all coming together and it was giving me a headache. Subalit balewala ang mga iyon kumpara sa halakhak na narinig namin sa labas. Natahimik kaming lahat. That man started laughing while everyone around him was just standing and unmoving. Bigla rin siyang tumigil sa pagtawa at saka bumunot ng baril. To our horror, he pointed it at the cafeteria glass wall and shot.

Everyone screamed and ducked their heads down as a loud bang echoed through the moon lit night. Everyone except for Van who was still standing

in front of me. Ni hindi siya natinag. Fortunately, nagmarka lang ang bala ng baril sa glass wall. Ni hindi man lang ito nabasag. Uh, yeah. Bullet proof. Halata sa ekspresyon ng lalaki sa labas ang frustration. Gusto niya bang patayin kami? He could do that. He could enter the cafeteria and shoot us. But what was keeping him away? What was keeping these frankensteins away from us? Why weren't they attacking us?

Nanatiling nakayuko ang lahat at halos ibaon ng sarili sa sahig sa takot na tumagos ang susunod na balang pakakawalan ng lalaki sa labas. He was such a creep! Subalit hindi nasundan ang unang putok ng baril. Isang matalim at nakakatakot na titig ang ginawa niya sa direksyon ng cafeteria at saka tumalikod at umalis. Nananatili lang ang mga tila estatwang estudyante sa labas.

That signalled everyone to calm down a bit. But no one can fully calm down in this situation. Ang ilan ay tila napapaiyak dahil sa tensyon. Kung meron lang akong pagpipilian, I would cry with them, too. I would curl into a ball, cry my eyeballs out and murmur something like, I want to go home. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't afford to do that.

Jin grabbed me and pulled me away from the glass wall. We ended up with Jamie, Mirden and Zach at the corner of the cafeteria.

"They can't enter here because this place is out of their zone. The cafeteria is out of their scope," mahinang sabi ni Mirden.

"You're talking alien, Mirden," sagot ni Jamie bilang paghingi ng eksplanasyon.

"Mayroong ginagamit na device para makontrol ang isang taong mayroong EOL sa sistema. It's like a remote and through that, they submit signals to the body para gawin nito ang utos mula sa programang naka-input sa remote. My theory is that they are using nanoparticles and nanotechnology to make the transmission work. Meaning that there are nanorobots in the Elixir of Life," paliwanag ni Mirden. Pare-pareho ang naging reaksyon namin maliban kay Zach. Okay, crap. This shouldn't go on like this.

"What the hell?!" Ang tangi kong nasabi. Stupid question.

“What is with this nano party pooper?” Tanong ni Jamie. Katulad ko, malamang ay nalilito rin siya.

“Do you know anything about Nanotechnology?” Tanong ni Zach. Si Mirden lang ang halatang nakakaintindi ng alien language na ito. “It’s a breakthrough research in science these days. Pero unfortunately, hindi pa ganun ka-successful ito.”

“So you’re saying it’s the same technology they are using in the EOL?” Tanong ni Jin. Tumangu-tango si Mirden. “How exactly?”

“There is this branch in nanotechnology called nanorobotics. Nanorobots are small particles—nanoparticles. This research focuses on using these small particles to control the whole. Ibig sabihin sa pamamagitan ng mga nanoparticles na ito ay nakokontrol ng EOL ang lahat ng senses ng isang tao. Nerves, nuerons. Siguro kaya parang zombie ang hitsura ng mga classmates natin,” paliwanag ni Zach. “Is that it?” Paniniguro niya kay Mirden.

“Yes. That is the concept, I think,” tugon ni Mirden sa kaniya.

Double crap! Kung tama ang pagkakaintindi ko, may kung anong particles ang Elixir of Life. And their technology is advanced and tricky. So that was why they needed the best chemists, scientists and physicists. All the geeks, too. Because they need all the genius for a project like this.

“At sa pamamagitan ng mga nakokontrol nilang students sa labas ay pinapanood nila tayo?” Tanong muli ni Jamie.

“Yes,” sagot ni Mirden.

“Bakit hindi pa sila umaatake? If they can control all those Frankensteins outside, they can make them attack, right?” Tanong ni Jin.

“I think they can’t reach this place. Or siguro dahil nag-oobserba pa sila. According to Dr. Mitton, project EOL is only on the experimental stage—” Naputol ang sinabi ni Mirden sa paghugot ng hininga ni Jamie. Maski ako, sina Jin at Zach ay bahagyang nagulat. Experimental stage pa lang ito? Sa

ganitong lawak at tindi ng epekto? What more kung maperpekto ito? This project shouldn’t come to fruitition. Baka magsanhi pa ito ng pagkawasak ng mundo.

“May mga taong hindi lubos na nakokontrol ng Elixir of Life,” patuloy ni Mirden at saka ibinaling ang paningin sa akin. Yes, I was one of the uncontrollable ones. “That’s what makes the EOL project imperfect. That’s why they want you, Summer. If there is someone they can’t control, who knows how many others out there are like you. They don’t want that risk. That is why you’re the perfect human tester. They want to know what went wrong with your case. At kapag nagtagumpay sila sa’yo, tiyak na magtatagumpay din sila sa experiment na ito. And do you know what their success means?” Sa akin na lang nakatuon ang napakaseryosong paliwanag ni Mirden.

Marahan akong tumango. “I’ll die.” Alam ko na kung gaano kabigat ang problema ng EOL pero ngayon ko lang mas naiintindihan na mas mabigat pa pala ito kaysa sa inaakala ko. If I die and the experiment was successful… if the Project EOL is perfected dahil sa nakuha ako ng organisasyon, how many others are going to be victims of these damn drug?

“They won’t get you. I’ll never let it happen,” awtomatikong wika ni Jin.

“We’re trapped. It’s just a matter of time before they get her,” wika ni Zach. Halatang hindi naman na-appreciate ni Jin ang input na iyon ng best friend niya. But he was right. Yun din ang sinabi ni Dr. Mitton.

“Wait. How did Dr. Mitton know about this?” Tanong ko.

“She works for them,” Mirden said. We all gave her sharp looks. “But she’s just there to get information. Tulad natin, gusto niya ring iligtas ang Montello. Believe me. Kung meron man tayong dapat pagkatiwalaan, siya ‘yun,” aniya.

Tumango ako bilang pagsang-ayon. Hindi ba’t sinabi rin ni Van na mapagkakatiwalan si Dr. Mitton? Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko na lumingon sa direksyon niya. He was still looking through the glass walls.

“I think we should give the students some information. At pakalmahin muna natin all those freaking out. We wouldn’t want pandemonium here,” wika ni Zach. Sumang-ayon ang lahat. Zach, Mirden and Jamie went off towards the crowd while Jin stayed with me.

“Kung hindi mo napapansin, you’re staring at him,” maya-maya ay wika niya mula sa tabi ko. Sinulyapan ko siya. He was looking intently at me. Could things be more complicated than this?

“May gumugulo sa kaniya. Kanina pa s’ya nakatayo sa glass wall,” mahina kong sagot.

“And you wanna talk to him?” Tanong niya. Hindi ako sumagot. He was not my boyfriend. Kahit ilang beses niya pang sabihin sa ibang tao na girlfriend niya ako, nananatili pa rin ang katotohanan na wala kaming pormal na relasyon. He was my fake boyfriend. And I know that he actually knew that. He was not stupid to be so oblivious to the truth. At sa tingin ko, iyon din ang dahilan kung bakit ako nakakaramdam ng guilt. Alam niyang fake lang sa akin lahat but he still continued with it. That last thing that I wanted to do was break his heart because I know it’s terrible. And there was also the fact that he was an important friend. I really didn’t want to lose him.

“I… I…” Hindi ko alam ang dapat isagot sa tanong niya.

“Go on. I’ll just help Zach on his campaign for this election. No one in his right mind would want a Martial Law, right?” Nakangiti niyang sabi subalit hindi naman maitatanggi ang lungkot sa mga mata niya. Why was the moonlight making his eyes sadder? Hahakbang na sana siya palayo subalit hinawakan ko siya sa braso. Tumigil siya at humarap sa akin.

“I… I’m so sorry,” usal ko. I felt guilty. So d mn guilty and sad at the same time. Could someone understand how bad it felt?

He smiled at me. “Sa pagkakaalam ko, hindi mo ako sinuntok sa mukha o binuhusan ng coke o hindi pinakopya habang nag-i-exam. You know, yung mga karaniwang bagay na dapat ihingi ng paumahin,” sagot niya. I knew that he was trying to put humor in the situation subalit hindi ko

maramdaman ang sarili kong tumatawa. Nakatingin lang ako sa kaniya. Mukhang napansin niya rin iyon dahil naging seryoso ang ekspresyon niya.

“I’m sorry for making you sad. I’m sorry for making you feel this way. Mahirap makahanap ng katulad mo. And who the hell am I? We all know that I am not so lovely and my bitchy attitude is not really lovable. They are actually hateful. I’m definitely a living-walking-flaws in clothes. But despite all of that, you’re always here with me. Alam kong konting tao lang ang nagkakaroon ng concern sa akin and I don’t want to waste it now. I already learned from my past mistakes. And I don’t want to take anything for granted anymore. But you… I know I am hurting you—” He cut me off before I finshed my sentiments.

“I know where this conversation is going…” malungkot niyang sabi. Huminga ako ng malalim. It surprised me that I was so benevolent while talking to someone.

“You are one of those people who are important to me. And I don’t want to lose you,” wika ko. Sa pamamagitan ng mapanglaw na liwanag ng buwan, nakita ko ang pagkislap ng kaliwa niyang mata at agad siyang tumingala to stop the tears that were about to fall.

“You are never going to lose me, Summer,” aniya. “Whether you rip my heart off or break it into pieces, I will endure the pain. But I will never leave you. I can take all the heartbreak you will bring me. D mn, you can call me an idiotic masochist but I will never leave you,” he sincerely said. I suddenly wanted to cry. How did I deserve something like this? Maybe I saved the world on my past life. And what was I supposed to do now? I was going to break the heart of possibly the only person that could feel like this toward me.

“But this kind of thing… it won’t work if it’s one-sided,” wika ko. At sa pagkakataong sinabi ko ang bagay na iyon ay tila gusto ko iyong bawiin. The pain that registered in his eyes was unbearable. Napakasama ko.

“I knew that but hearing it from you… The blow is like that of an atomic bomb,” malungkot siyang ngumiti. “So, you’re fake-breaking up with me?”

“Jin…”

“I know. And it’s okay. I understand. But I will still stay. Bukod sa wala naman akong ibang choice kundi magstay, I’m still not leaving your side. At ang hiling ko lang ay hayaan mo ako,” aniya.

“Why? Why are you like that?” Tanong ko.

“Dahil natatakot ako na baka hindi ko na maramdaman ang ganitong pakiramdam. Who knows if I only have one d mn shot in my lifetime to feel this way? You know, hindi lang naman sakit ang nararamdaman mo once you fall for someone. There is also joy in it. And even though it’s so d mn f cking painful, I still want to feel the joy,” sagot niya.

That got me thinking. One shot in a lifetime. Should I deprive myself of the pleasure of being honest? Awtomatikong napalingon ako sa taong nakaharap sa glass wall. He’d been there for a while.

“You like him… unconsciously. But now that I’ve told you what you don’t recognize by yourself, you’re conscious about it already.” Jin chuckled. I glared at him.

“I certainly don’t,” I groaned.

“Just go to him. I’ll never stop you from what your heart wants.” And he winked at me. Just like that, he was back to the normal, playful Jin Cast. Paano niya nagagawa yun? Napailing na lang ako habang minamasdan siya patungo sa kinaroroonan ni Zach. Probably to ruin his friend’s election campaign.

What my heart wants. Ibinalik kong muli ang paningin ko sa taong iyon. He seemed really troubled. Isang malalim na hininga ang ginawa ko bago naglakad palapit sa kaniya. Tumigil ako sa tabi niya and looked at him. He looked so worried that I couldn’t stop saying, “Don’t worry.”

Lumingon siya sa akin. Our eyes met. Really? What was up with this moonlight? Why was it making everyone’s eyes sad? I used to love

moonlight. Well, it was romantic—dark and fairytales and all. But now… I guess I found its other purpose.

His eyes… Those sad eyes… sad and filled with pain.

“Aren’t you worried?” Ganting tanong niya sa akin. It got me. Yes, we should be freaking worried to death now.

“I am. But I’m never doubting. Everything will be fine,” sagot ko. Hinahawakan ko pa rin ang sinabi ni Tyler. I was putting my trust on it. Hindi siya agad sumagot. Sa halip ay muli niyang itinuon ang paningin niya sa mga nakatayong estudyante sa labas. Tila nakikipagpalitan siya ng tingin sa bawat isa.

“He was from the Novou clan. Hindi mo maiintindihan ang nararamdaman ko,” kontrolado ang emosyon niyang sagot.

“He’s an assassin. That much I know. But who knows how many assassins they have out there,” sagot ko.

Umiling siya. “This is not just about Montello High anymore. The moment I got in, it stopped being just about the school. Now that I was involved, there was only one ultimate goal for the Novou assassins. It’s to get to the Frenieres. And he couldn’t just come in here because I’m here. He knows I will kill him the moment he step a foot inside the cafeteria. They are being careful,” seryoso niyang sabi.

Hindi ko maiwasang hindi mag-alala. The assassin’s only goal was to kill Van Freniere, if he got lucky enough. And Van obviously would defend himself. Dalawa lang ang magiging katapusan ng paghaharap na iyon kung sakali. One of them should die. Subalit tila tumututol ang damdamin ko sa dalawang senaryong iyon. I didn’t want him to be killed. But I’d hate to see him kill someone. Subalit mukhang hindi mapaghihiwalay ang dalawang bagay na iyon. Kailangang pumili ng isa. Oh, tossed coins! But I don’t want to see him dead!

“Everyone will be safe, Van,” hindi ko alam kung anong sasabihin ko upang mapagaan ang mabigat niyang isipin. He looked at me straight in the eyes.

D mn. My freaking heart decided to skip beating.

“The Novous killed my mom. They killed the most wonderful woman that ever walked the Earth. They also killed Ty’s mom, Catherine del Valle. And she was a legendary mafia reaper. And then, they got to Tyler… And now…”

“They can never kill you!” Agad kong sabi. It was just that the thought of him dead was troubling and… painful.

“Of course, they can’t. But you… you’re not some immortal freak. They can kill you,” binigyang-diin niya ang salitang ‘you’ para maintindihan ko. But it only got me confused.

“Ano’ng kinalaman ko sa listahan ng mga papatayin?” Kunot-noo kong tanong. I was a thorn at the Stone’s plans but the Novous didn’t concern me. They were only concerned about the Frenieres. And even though I was friends with Tyler, I wasn’t that important enough to be on the hit list. So why did Van thought that I would be a target instead of him?

Tila naman nagising siya sa isang spell at atubiling ibinalik ang paningin sa labas. “You can do your plan and save yourself.” Sa halip na sagutin ang tanong ko ay iyon ang sinabi niya.

“Plans?” Tanong kong muli. He was so confusing me right now.

“My purpose here. You just can’t go through the heart of this mess. Masyadong delikado. So instead of using me as a bait to lure them out, why don’t you just use me as a leverage and save yourself and the others?” Wika niya.

“What are you talking about?” Malakas kong sabi.

He seemed impatient and frustrated now. “Don’t be stupid, Summer. Dalawang tao lang ang nagre-register na big deal sa mga taong kalaban natin. Van Freniere and Summer Leondale. Hindi na kailangang madamay pa ang iba. Now, the brillant plan will be this: I will go out to make a commotion and let these Frankensteins get to me and drag me towards who

knows who. While you… you will lead the others out of this place and escape. Kick those who will get in your way. Alam mo naman yung secret way out sa Nightwoods, di ba?" Paliwanag niya.

"Yes. Not secret anymore. But what the hell!" Muli kong sabi. How could he tell me a plan like this? It was a good one and I would admit that he brillantly made that in just a spur of the moment. But what the hell?! This was a terrible, terrible idea. "You will never sacrifice yourself! I won't let you!" Matatag kong sabi.

Biglang bumalik sa akin ang mga sinabi ni Jin. It was one d mn shot in a lifetime. How could I just leave it in this hell hole?!

Soundtrack for this chapter: I Wouldn't Mind – He Is We

+ Siel Alstreim+

Chapter 45: Taking Shots

Hindi ako makapaniwalang pinaplano nila ang bagay na ito. Ito na yata ang pinakawalang kwentang planong narinig ko. Paano nila nagagawang pag-usapan ito at ikonsidera? Nanatili akong malayo sa grupo at sa halip ay naupo malapit sa kinaroonan ni Makki. Wala pa rin siyang malay. Lihim kong nahiling na sana ay gising na lang siya. Kung gising siya at naririnig niya ang mga naririnig ko, malamang tututol rin siya.

"First light of the day, we will take this plan. I don't want to see anyone panicking and cause delay. If you plan on doing that or you think you will have such a reaction, let me know. Cause I'll tie you up on one of these chairs and leave you behind," puno ng awtoridad na wika ni Zach. I rolled my eyes at him. I was starting to hate him! How could he approve of this? Uh! And why the hell was I asking such a stupid question? He was the Dark Monarch leader. Of course, he would take advantage of this!

"We will run and will never look back. Gawin natin ito hindi lang para sa sarili natin kundi upang iligtas ang mga kaibigan at kaklase nating maiiwan rito," wika ni Jamie. I liked her being brave and all that, but what the hell! Right now, I just wanted to have a fighting match with her. Even Mirden

agreed with them! Tiningnan ko ang taong sentro ng usapang ito. Nakaupo lang siya at hindi nagsasalita. Of course he was the one who made the plan!

I was biting my nails, waiting for them to realize na mali ito. Ilang minuto pa nilang pinag-usapan ang mga gagawin bago nila napagpasyahang magpahinga. Mayroon pa kaming ilang oras bago lumiwanag ng tuluyan. Jin sat on my side.

“Unang gagawin natin paglabas ng Montello High ay humingi ng tulong sa mga awtoridad. I can talk to Detective Penber to deal with this,” wika ni Jin. I just looked at him helplessly.

“We can’t do this!” Matatag kong sabi.

“Alam kong nag-aalala ka sa kaniya. But he’s Van Freniere. He didn’t get the name for nothing, you know,” wika niya.

Inihilamos ko ang kamay ko sa mukha ko. Gusto kong sabihin sa kaniya na sa ngayon, walang silbi ang pangalan ni Van. What was in a name! “Hindi mo naiintindihan!” Frustrated kong sabi.

“Naiintindihan kita, Summer. It is you who doesn’t want to admit to yourself what you’re feeling! You think you’ll be less cool if yor’re going to be true to your feelings?” Wika niya. I frowned at him.

“It’s not about how I feel!” Mataas ang boses kong pagtanggi. Umiling siya.

“Of course, it is! Dahil kung hindi, hindi ka magkakaganyan! Para kang batang nagtatantrum sa isang sulok dahil sa hindi mo gusto ang larong nilalaro namin. My God, Summer! The plan is good! It’s the only shot we have!”

Hindi ko na napigilan ang sarili ko. Marahas akong tumayo at humarap sa kaniya. Wala akong paki-alam kahit lumikha man ako ng ingay. “We can’t just leave him here!” Malakas ang boses kong sabi. Natahimik ang lahat at nagising ang mga nagnanakaw ng oras upang mag-pahinga. Saka lang rumehistro sa utak ko ang nakakahiyang reaksyon ko. Jeez! Maybe I was

really like a kid with tantrums! As if to save me from humiliation, isang boses ang bumasag sa nakakailang na katahimikan.

“Oh, shit! Who woke me up?!” Malakas na angal ng nagmamay-ari ng tinig. Awtomatikong lumingon kami kay Makki. His palm was on his face, covering his eyes. Uh. He must be having the sweetest vision from the Elixir of Life. I wondered what he saw. I wonder who he was with. Bigla kong naalala si Lawrence. Siguro nga ay nakamove-on na ako sa nangyari. I couldn’t feel that desperate, painful and longing feeling anymore. I still miss him but I can’t feel the guilt. Maybe this was acceptance.

“And who the hell just punched me?! God! My head sucks!” He whined. This time, tuluyan na siyang naupo sa sahig.

From my peripheral vision, I saw Van walking towards our direction. At first I thought he was walking towards me. Subalit nilagpasan niya ako at nagtungo sa direksyon ni Makki.

“Listen, bro. You were drugged. You were controlled like a stupid robot. And someone needed to punch you dead because you were an idiot,” malinaw at prangka ang mensaheng sinabi ni Van sa tila ngayon pa lang na natatauhang si Makki.

Ilang segundo ang lumipas bago siya mabilis na tumayo at nilibot ang paningin sa paligid na tila may hinahanap. “Who punched me?!” Tila nanghahamon niyang tanong. “At bakit ba napakadilim?” Dagdag niya. Hinila siya ni Van sa kuwelyo ng suot niyang damit at iniharap sa glass wall. Biglang natigagal mula sa pagrereklamo si Makki.

“You were like them. That little punch on the face saved you,” mahina at seryosong wika ni Van. Hindi naman nakalagpas sa leader ng Dark Monarch ang sinabi ni Van Freniere.

“I was the one who did it. And it was not just a little punch. I’d love to do it again to prove it,” wika ni Zach.

Makki snorted. “Oh, no need. I’ve always known you wanted to touch and caress my handsome face. And that was taking advantage, dude. You

attacked me while I was weak. I felt so used and humiliated!" Makki said in a girly, high-pitched voice. I couldn't help but roll my eyes at him.

"Oh, yeah? I can do PDA, too! I can kick your ass in public," wika ni Zach. Tsk. Dark Monarch and Black Government. Sasagot pa sana si Makki subalit muli siyang kinausap ni Van.

"You didn't tell me you were on drugs," aniya.

Naguguluhang tiningnan siya ni Makki. "I wasn't! I didn't know what happened. But I'm not on drugs!" Tanggi ni Makki. Base sa ekspresyon ni Van, mukhang naniniwala siya sa sinabi ng kaibigan niya. And just like that, I believed in what Makki said, too. D mn! Kailan pa ako naging gaya-gaya?

Ipinaliwanag nila kay Makki ang planong pagtakas. Sa simula ay hindi rin ito sang-ayon na iwan si Van. He even wanted to stay with him. Subalit nang sinabi nila ang risk ng pananatili lalo na't si Van lang ang puntirya ng grupo—well, maliban sa akin. At ano nga ba ang karaniwang ginagawa sa bagay na hindi importante para sa kanila? Pumayag lang siya sa plano nang tawagin ni Van ang pangalan niya at kausapin sa pamamagitan ng mga mata.

Tsk! Why the hell can't they see that we just can't leave Van here? Bakit ba walang ibang estudyante rito ang pumapalag sa plano nila? Uh, Trinity. As much as I didn't want her here, it was painfully obvious na hindi siya papayag na maiwan dito si Van Freniere! And then something struck me. Trinity likes Van. Scratch that. She was obsessed with him. Was it possible that I… that I share the same feelings for Van? No! No, way! We were talking about Van here! There was no way I was going to fall him! One tragic ending was enough.

Halos lahat kami ay hindi pa natutulog. Kahit itago pa nila upang manatiling cool, alam kong pagod na rin sila. We were all exhausted at malapit na ring maubos ang stock ng pagkain sa cafeteria. Ilan lang iyon sa mga rason kung bakit kailangan na naming makatakas.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, Cute Girl," wika ni Makki sa tabi ko. Ni hindi ko namalayan ang paglapit niya sa akin.

“Oh, I’m not a very forgiving person,” sarkastiko kong sagot. I couldn’t help it. Naiinis pa rin ako na pumayag siya sa plano.

He just smiled at me. “I don’t want to leave him, too,” wika niya. Bakas ang lungkot sa boses niya. Alam kong naiisip niya ang parehong senaryong kinatatakutan ko.

“We can think of another plan,” bigla kong sabi. Para akong batang nagsusumamong ilipat ang channel ng TV. And Makki, like an older, mean brother, umiling lang siya.

Makki left and Jin went to my side. I frowned when he held my hand. Lumingon ako sa entrance ng cafeteria at nakita kong doon nagtungo si Makki. Naroon din sina Van, Zach, Mirden at Jamie.

“Let’s go there,” wika ko at nagsimulang humakbang subalit muli akong napabalik nang hilahin ako ni Jin.

“Let’s just stay here,” wika niya. I looked at him helplessly. I wanted to scream at him saying, I want to go there! but I stopped myself. He didn’t deserve to be the receiver of my frustration. Bawat kilos ko ay alam kong iniinda niya. Kung kaya nanatili na lang ako sa kinatatayuan ko at pinagmasdan ang taong iyon na nakaharap sa entrance ng cafeteria.

Nagsimula nang lumiwanag at malinaw nang nakikita mula sa glass wall ang mga nakatayong estudyante sa labas. I suddenly felt nervous. Mas tumindi iyon nang sa huling pagkakataon ay lumingon si Van at nagtama ang tingin namin. Malamang na kanina pa niya nararamdaman na pinagmamasdan ko siya mula sa kinatatayuan ko. I didn’t hold back. Why should I deprive myself of looking at him to my heart’s desire? Kaya kong titigan siya ng buong araw huwag lang siyang lalabas ng pintong iyan. Subalit sa muling pagkurap ng mga mata niya ay ibinalik niya ang kaniyang paningin sa harapan ng entrance. That was when Zach opened the door and Van stepped outside, towards the still standing and unmoving crowd. I felt like my heart just stopped functioning. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think.

Van ran to the middle of the crowd, taking his time. And as if a natural reflex, the Frankensteins started to walk towards him. They were not

running but they actually walked faster. It was like they had only one thought, one style of walking with same pace and speed. They were so organized in a creepy way. Nawala si Van sa paningin ko at medyo nakalayo na sila mula sa cafeteria. Muling nagsalita si Zach at kinuha ang atensyon ng lahat. Subalit hindi ko magawang alisin ang paningin ko sa papalayong grupo. Naramdaman ko ang paghawak ni Jin sa kamay ko kung kaya't napilitan akong lingunin siya.

"We have to go, Summer," wika niya.

Hindi ako agad sumagot. Sa halip ay muli kong nilingon ang glass wall. We were getting more lights. But no matter how bright it was, why couldn't I see him anymore? Tila nakaramdam ako ng hapdi sa aking mga mata. This thing that I was feeling, why was it messing with me?

Halos hindi ko namalayan ang pag-uumpisang tumakbo ng mga estudyante mula sa cafeteria palabas sa pangunguna ni Makki. They were heading towards the Nightwoods.

"Summer!" Tawag sa akin ni Jamie at Mirden. Nasa entrance na sila ng cafeteria kasama si Zach. Hindi ako sumagot.

"Jin! Drag her! Carry her! I don't care! We're running out of time!" Sigaw ni Zach. I frowned at him. Hindi na niya kailangang i-utos yun. Nagsimula akong tumakbo kasunod ni Jin. Lumabas na rin ang mga natitirang estudyante at mga staff ng cafeteria. We ran fast. We ran for our life because it was our one shot out of here. We had to save ourselves.

The morning light kissed my skin. It should feel glorious on normal days. But it was far from a normal day. Instead, it stung my skin. It hurt my eyes. I looked around the school yard while running. D mn! I so wanted to cry! We were leaving. We were leaving the school at its worst. What will happen to those who were left behind? What will happen to him? What will happen to my one d mn shot of a lifetime?

With that thought, I stopped on my tracks. Hindi ko kaya. Sa lahat ng mga nakakatakot na bagay na kaya kong gawin, ito ang hindi ko kaya. Kung tutuusin, madali lang naman ang kailangan kong gawin. Kailangan ko lang

tumakboo at huwag lumingon. Kailangan ko lang ipunin lahat ng lakas ng loob ko at gamitin sa pagtakbo. But I couldn't! I couldn't find the d mn strength to run.

Tumigil din si Jin sa pagtakbo at lumingon sa akin. "Summer?" He asked once he was on my side. Nagtatanong ang mga mata niyang habang nakatingin sa akin. Meron ding takot sa mga mata niya. Takot sa maaari kong gawin.

"I'm sorry, Jin. I can't." And then I felt a tear fall from my eyes. His expression suddenly became troubled, like he was battling a war inside himself. Marahas siyang humigit ng hininga at sa isang hakbang ay hawak na niya ako sa beywang habang ang isang kamay niya ay nasa pisngi ko, wiping that freaking tear.

"Why? God, Summer! Please don't." He sounded desperate. Mukhang alam na niya kung ano ang gusto kong gawin. Tinatanong ko sa sarili ko kung bakit ko ito ginagawa at bakit ko rin ito nagagawa sa kaniya. I hoped he knew that it was unintentional. How could we ever escape from this?

"I'm so sorry," tangi ko lang nasabi. It saddened me to see him like this.

"It's that one d mn shot in a lifetime, right?" Tanong niya.

"I swear, if I'm feeling another thing… something that I know, things that I could explain…" Subalit hindi ko kayang ipaliwanag ang lahat. Hindi sapat ang nalalabi naming oras upang ipaliwanag kung ano man itong nararamdaman ko ngayon. Tumango si Jin. I think I didn't really have to explain to him. Because he knew. Probably, we were wearing the same, ugly shoes.

"Be safe, Summer. Gagawin ko ang lahat paglabas namin just to save you from here," pangako ni Jin before reluctantly letting me go. "And don't say sorry again. I like you just for being you. Everything you do is a part of you. So don't feel sorry about it," seryoso at malungkot niyang sabi. Screw the time! Gusto kong umiyak sa harapan niya. Gusto kong ulit-ulitin sa pandinig ko ang mga sinabi niya. Hindi sa lahat ng oras ay maririnig ko

iyon mula sa isang tao. Subalit oras na lang ang tangi kong natitira at unti-unti na itong nauubos.

“Thank you, Jin. For the acceptance. For accepting me for who I am,” pilit ang ngiti kong sabi. And after that parting hug, we ran towards the exact opposite directions. He ran towards the Nightwoods and I ran towards Montello’s main building where the creepy group disappeared.

This was probably cliche for my own weird acts. Screwing the plan and going on my own way. Stupid. But whatever happens from here, I was sure I was going to take it. It was like accepting the consequences after admitting your own mistakes.

Nasa entrance na ako ng Montello main building nang makita ko ang grupong hinahanap ko. Van was actually taking everyone down, not exactly killing them but just stunning them. I was about to run and help him but a strong force grabbed me from behind and I felt the cold nose of the gun on the side of my neck. Why was it always on my neck! Another figure showed up in front of me. He was wearing a mask and a dark tuxedo like those others from the Stones. Subalit hindi niya kailangan magtago sa likod ng maskara. I knew. Of course! How could I not know him?

“See, buddy? I got her first,” malakas ang pamilyar na boses ng taong may hawak sa akin. It was the Novou guy from last night at hindi ko mapigilang hindi gapangan ng takot.

“D mn it! Why can’t you just go with the plan?!” Galit na boses ni Van ang sunod kong narinig. Tiningnan niya ang nakamaskarang lalaki at saka ibinalik ang paningin sa akin. He looked at lot of things at once—pissed off, annoyed and frustrated. But the weirdest thing was… he was clearly worried. Not simply worried but scared worried. So, tell me again. What could make a Freniere so freaking worried? But before I could process another thought, I saw him being captured as I felt the painful pressure of the gun at the back of my neck.

Everything went black.

Chapter 46: Behind the Mask

A/N: Author s-Gonna-Rant-On-You-Something-Important-Kind-of-Note

Everything s planned and outlined. The near end is coming. Can you feel it? Haha. Anyway, I mentioned on my Watty Status before that I promised someone to finish MHSG by December, right? But something occurred that really inspired me so I m here doing the writing frenzy-mode and taking everyone s breath away by posting 2 chapters in a week. Wow! I received all the love! Thank you!

So here s the thing. MHSG will have the final conclusion on the 50th chapter. So brace yourselves! And something really awesome occurred! Can you guess what that is? Haha. And yeah, uulitin ko ito: Readers are so awesome! We are so awesome! It s like, tell me what books you read and I ll tell you how awesome you are! Haha. And you really are!

P.S. Let me address some stuff cause I am receiving a lot of queries about it.

Soft copies I m giving no soft copies yet. I got better plans like giving a hard copy for free if you promise to be a good girl like Autumn plan. Haha.

Van s POV Refer to previous A/N and see how technical editor is. And oh, I suggest you prepare a tissue for bleeding.

Summer s over-thinking and not thinking at all skills Talk to Summer and ask her for some combat fighting techniques

MHSG Character s account They are so fictional. They only exist in this novel because the Earth is so bothered by their awesomeness! Haha. You can always have them in your heart!

Dedications We re trying to sort it out. Sorry sa mga nagtatanong na di namin napagbibigyan. Busy talaga.

SLOW UPDATE I can update everyday and give you a crappy, short freaking chapter. But really, I m trying to do my best despite of my heavy schedule! Haha. Dude! I m never sleeping because I love writing this novel. Imagine, it took me hours and sleepless nights to write a chapter and then, it

will only take you minutes to read it and demand more? Haha. I could say more but I won t. Try asking Editor about this! She would snap! Haha! It s really fun to make her snap, she becomes so technical! But I m so not gonna ginger snaps on you! I ll just FIND you instead. Haha.

Publishing MHSG —

OceanofPDF.com

Sequels and Coming Books I m so in love with words and will forever write.

Soundtrack for this chapter: Broken by Chris Sligh

Siel Alstreim

I should have been saved. I should have been free and unscathed. I had the chance to be out and away from this hell hole. Subalit isang maliit na pagkilos ko lang na labag sa plano ay heto ang kinasadlakan ko. But what could I do? I couldn t bear to leave. I just couldn t leave. Pinilit kong imulat ang mata ko upang alamin kung nasaan ako. Tsk. I think I should be getting used to situations like this. Ang unang nakita ko ay puting tiles na sahig. Well, I was expecting some dark and gloomy place instead of a clean, tiled floor. At ang sunod ay ang taong nakagapos at nakasalampak sa sahig. He was looking at me intently and worry was still in his eyes. Or maybe my vision was just playing with me.

I have always expected you to do stupid things. But not as stupid as this. Narinig kong sabi niya. Bakas ang kontroladong galit sa seryoso niyang tono.

Oh. I thought you might need some company, kalmado kong sagot but deep in my thoughts, I was so relieved that he was okay. Hindi siya agad sumagot. Alam kong nagtatagis ang bagang niya sa inis habang nakatingin sa akin. Hindi ko na lang iyon pinansin at sa halip ay isang bagay ang pumasok sa isip ko.

Oh, my God! Did they hurt you? Tanong ko. Hindi siya ulit sumagot. Tumingin lang siya sa ibang direksyon. Pinilit kong i-upo ang sarili ko sa sahig. Tulad niya, nakagapos rin ang mga kamay ko. But the way they tied him was so ridiculous. Para bang kaya nitong makawala kapag kamay lang ang ginapos nila kung kaya t mula dibdib hanggang beywang ay napupuluputan siya ng makapal na lubid. May sugat ang kaniyang labi at may pasa rin siya sa ilalim ng kaliwa niyang mata. I suddenly felt rage. Those stupid cowards!

Isa pang bagay ang aking naalala. Van, the one with the mask The traitor Subalit bago ko pa magawang tapusin ang sinasabi ko ay bumukas na ang pinto ng silid at pumasok ang taong may hawig kay Andrew Novou, ang traydor at ang iba pang nakamaskara. Nasa limang kalalakihan ang ngayon ay sumisiyasat sa amin.

So, sleeping beauty is already awake. Did the beast enjoy watching her sleep? That creepy man said. He was playful like a kid. Playful in a dark and creepy way. Hindi ako kumurap nang lumapit siya sa akin at yumuko sa harap ko upang magkatapat ang aming mga mukha.

I have never seen a girl like you in my whole d mn lifetime. Too bad, no one will ever see you anymore. At saka hinawakan ang pisngi ko. I gasped in horror and jerked my head away from his fingers.

If you touch her again, no one not even those stupid d mn pests could ever remember or trace your whole family line, Ephraim Novou. All of us turned to Van s direction. His voice when he said that was the coldest and the most dangerous I d ever heard from him. No one said anything. It was like he just induced fear to everyone. Matapos ang ilang segundo ay mukhang nakarecover ang tinawag na Ephraim. He gave a loud, nervous laugh at saka muling bumaling sa akin. Sa isang iglap lang ay nasa leeg ko na ang kamay niya at pinipigilan ang aking paghinga. Oh no! He was going to kill me! Nahagip ng paningin ko ang marahas na pagpiglas ni Van at pilit na pagkawala sa pagkakagapos.

I d be so happy to kill this girl right now! And the legacy of the Novou assassins will be more famous! I, Ephraim Novou, unlike my stupid brother Andrew, had killed the most recent woman a Freniere had ever loved. I would become a living legend in the underground society. And he laughed like a mad man. But what the hell was he talking about? Loved? Oh, no! I need air! I freaking need to breathe!

I saw the traitor put his hands on Ephraim s shoulder. The Stones need her to perfect the Elixir of Life. Kapag pinatay mo siya, hindi lang ang Mafia Freniere ang tatapos sa alamat mo kundi pati na rin ang organisasyong nagbabayad sa yo, wika nito. As expected, he was always logical. But of all people, why him?

Tumigil sa ginagawang pagtawa si Ephraim at masama akong tiningnan bago pinakawalan ang leeg ko. Oh, air! I inhaled the oxygen as much as I needed. My neck would probably be the cause of my death.

You re still lucky. Tingnan natin kung hanggang saan tatagal ang swerte mo, wika ni Ephraim bago tuluyang lumabas ng silid. Sumunod ang tatlo pa nilang kasama matapos siguruhing mahigpit pa rin kaming nakagapos. The traitor stayed.

So you re the one behind this all this time? Tanong ko matapos sumara ang pinto ng silid. Hindi ako makapaniwalang nagagawa niya ito. Tinanggal niya ang maskara and I clearly saw his face. Van gave a fake, insulting laugh.

I ve always known that you can do something unexpected, umiiling na wika ni Van. He seemed not to care at all. But I could see through his mask now. Maybe when you really put your attention to someone, you would know so much more than what they show. It was like reading between the lines.

I just want to clean the school, wika ng Vice President ng Student Council. Ano pa bang kailangan kong malaman tungkol sa isang Ethan Montreal?

Clean? You freaking idiot! Nakikita mo ba kung paano nila sinisira ang Montello High? Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko kung kaya t galit ko siyang nasigawan.

Ikaw ang hindi nakakakita, Summer! Sa ginagawa kong ito, babalik sa simula ang lahat. Mawawala ang mga gangsters. Hindi na rin mapapasailalim ng Mafia Freniere ang Montello High. Stones Organization will leave once they perfect the EOL Project. And then all the students can start again, seryosong wika niya.

Tumawa ng nakakaloko si Van sa sinabi ni Ethan. Akala ko, ikaw na ang pinakalohikal na taong nakilala ko. D mn! You even mastered 48 Laws of Power! But this one? You re not just a moron but you re a freaking lunatic

that should go to the Asylum! Then Van showed his anger. Lumapit dito si Ethan subalit pinanatili niya pa rin ang distansiya.

I am so tired of you being the leader! I am so tired of everything that depends on you! I am so tired of all the unlawful things surrounding you! I am so tired of having everyone pick you instead of me! Galit ring sagot ni Ethan.

I couldn t interfere in their conversation. This was between them.

So all of this is because of your envy? Naiiling na tanong ni Van.

Ethan glared at him. I am not envious of your stinking life.

Yours stinks more, komento ni Van. I just watched as Ethan s fist connected to Van s jaw. I could feel the intensity of this conversation and I couldn t do anything except watch a friendship a brotherhood fall apart.

Did it feel good to punch a Giovanni Freniere? Tanong ni Van. Mukhang gusto pa siyang saktan ni Ethan. I swallowed and then spoke.

Stop it! Pareho silang tumingin sa kinaroroonan ko. Hindi ko rin ini-expect na makikinig sa akin si Ethan dahil hindi na niya tinangkang suntukin si Van. Nagsimulang lumapit sa akin si Ethan and Van started to protest.

Don t you dare come near her, you traitor! Galit niyang sigaw subalit hindi nakinig si Ethan. Humakbang pa rin siya tungo sa akin at saka lumuhod sa harapan ko.

Tama si Ephraim. Mahirap makahanap ng tulad mo. And if he kills you, it would really be a waste. But I can protect you from him, Summer. I can make the Stones Organization keep you safe from him. You just have to choose me, seryosong wika ni Ethan.

Kung sa ibang pagkakataon lang, masasabi kong napakaganda ko dahil sa mga natatanggap kong ganitong proposition. But Ethan was seeing me as a

thing. He was seeing me as a unique possession and not as a rightful human. Malungkot akong umiling sa kaniya.

You ve been nice to me all this time, Ethan. But these things just don t make sense at all. I d be happier to face death instead of choosing all your crap, seryoso kong sabi. For a moment, I could see the hatred in his eyes but it didn t show on his formal voice.

Always the wrong choices, Summer. Watch until we perfect the Elixir of Life, pormal niyang sabi at saka lumabas ng kwarto.

Tanging ang tunog lang ng paghinga namin ni Van ang naiwan sa silid matapos ang pakikipag-usap kay Ethan. Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili kong lingunin si Van. Masama lang niyang tinitigan ang puting sahig. Kung nakakapinsala lang ang tingin niya ay malamang na nagdulot na ito ng butas sa tiles. I wondered what he was thinking right now. I wondered how he felt after being betrayed by one of his closest friends. They could even be brothers! How did it feel when the person you trusted the most turned out to be the snake who was going to bite you? The first time that I read the Cask of Amontillado, I rolled my eyes, thinking that it was just fiction. Well, Edgar Allan Poe got some violent thoughts. Well, maybe it made sense. But the thing was why would Ethan Montreal do something like this?

Van Are you okay? Mahina kong tanong.

I could take the thought of him betraying me. I could understand even in the most twisted way why he wanted to kill me. But Makki? They were like d mn brothers! Nanggigigil at mahinang wika ni Van. Hindi ko tiyak kung sa akin siya nakikipag-usap o gusto niya lang ilabas ang nasa utak niya. But I would take the chance. Maybe he really was talking to me.

Ano ng kinalaman ni Makki rito? Naguguluhan kong tanong.

Ini-angat niya ang paningin at tiningnan ako. His eyes were furious but it also showed pain. He really did believe in their friendship. Makki would never take drugs. Why do you think Makki became one of them? He was drugged! Ethan drugged him. That bastard! That stinking traitor! Galit na

wika ni Van. Mukhang naiintindihan ko na ang nangyari kay Makki. I also understood now why Ethan was promoting the visitors in the school.

You really treat him Ethan, I meant as your friend, right? Tanong ko. The fury in his eyes seemed to soften but I didn t see enough. Muli siyang tumungo sa sahig. And that was when I knew that he was really affected by Ethan s betrayal.

Van I started to say but he cut me off.

You shouldn t have stayed. You should have saved yourself with the others. You shouldn t have been here with me, tied and locked in a stupid room waiting to be killed. Goddammit, Summer! Why did you have to come back? He said in frustration. I wanted to slap him. After everything that I did, ganito lang ang sasabihin niya?

I ran back here because you were still here! Kung saan ko man gustong pumunta, you have no say to that! It s my life! If I want to be with you, then you have no say to that! If I want to save you, you don t care! It s my choice! Oh crap! I was blabbering stupid things. I couldn t control my mouth. He should be laughing at my stupidity but he became serious. Seryoso lang niya akong tinitigan sa mukha and I couldn t help but stare back.

Should I be with you then? He asked. But unlike the last time he said this, he wasn t mocking me right now. Natigilan ako. Oh, crap! Why was this question getting into me? Hindi ako sumagot. Nakatitig lang ako sa kaniya.
Summer, should I be with you? Tanong niyang muli. Subalit bago pa man ako muling makahuma ay bumukas na muli ang pinto at pumasok ang ilang taong nakaputi with masks on their faces katulad ng mga nasa laboratory noon. They grabbed and dragged me towards the door.

Where are you taking me? Kinakabahan kong tanong. Of course, I already knew the answer. I knew where they were taking me.

Let her go! Van growled. They seemed to be stunned for a moment. I felt fear towards Van, too. But these people weren t stupid. They knew that Van couldn t hurt them because he was tied up in the most ridiculous way.

I panicked as the door closed behind me, leaving a furious Van in the room. I got scared. But I wasn t scared because of what would happen. I was scared because I was away from him. I was scared not because of what they might do to me. I was scared of what they would do to him. I realized that I get more courage when I m with him. I also realized that this plan was ridiculous. Kidnapping Van and making him bait? It felt so stupid now compared to how good it sounded before. So I messed it up. I messed it up by trying to save the bait.

Dinala nila ako sa isa pang silid. Mas malawak na silid na puno ng iba pang nakaputing lab gown at nakamaskara. They were working on their own equipments. Naglakad kami tungo sa pinakasentrong bahagi ng lugar kung saan mayroong isang napakalaking bubog na kahon o mas mabuting tawagin kong bago kong kulungan. It was like the same one from before. And I realized that we were actually on the sixth floor of the main building.

Noong makapasok kami sa silid ay naramdaman ko ang pagtusok ng karayom sa leeg ko. Gusto kong pumalag subalit agad ko ring naramdaman ang unti-unti nang paghina ng mga tuhod ko. Isang babaeng nakaputing lab gown at white mask ang sumalo sa akin. She looked familiar. She was the same one from the laboratory last time.

I got her. Kukunin ko ang blood pressure niya and prepare her for the experiment, wika niya sa iba pa.

Tumango ang mga nagdala sa akin at saka lumabas matapos nila akong ihiga sa nag-iisang tila hospital bed na naroon. She grabbed my arm gently and that was when I realized who she was. Kaya pamilyar ang boses niya noon pa.

Time, nanghihina kong sabi. Tumigil siya sandali sa kaniyang ginagawa bago iyon ipinagpatuloy. You mentioned my Dad how did you know him? Gamit ang natitira kong lakas ay tanong ko. Whatever they injected me was trying to make me unconscious. But it felt as if something was fighting that chemical, trying to keep me awake. Was this the purpose of the antidote?

Please Mahina kong paki-usap habang unti-unting bumibigay ang talukap ng aking mga mata.

She looked at me and said in the most silent voice, Once upon a time, there was a love story that started and ended in Montello High. The one finally moved on and found his own happy ending. The other stayed while still hanging on to the memories. The End, malungkot niyang kwento. It was probably the shortest love story that I had ever heard. But still, it got me sleepy like a kid.

What a sad story, bulong ko and for the second time since I started the day, I passed out.

Soundtrack for this chapter: Down by Jason Walker

Chapter 47: Shakespearean Tragedy

It felt so real. But I know that it wasn t. Dahil kung totoo ito, paano ako muling napunta sa lugar na ito? The crescent moon was actually smiling at me. The stars were enchanting as they show different colors in each second. The yard and the fountain looked dark and mysterious. I could see everything from here. I could see everything from the balcony of this enormous Victorian mansion. I knew that I shouldn t be here but the contentment of just standing in the balcony was all I wanted right now.

I gasped as someone grabbed my waist and hoisted me up the porch railings. I ve always known you wanted to kill me. But can t you think of more creative ways than to make me fall to the ground? Biro ko nang mapagsino ang taong iyon. Ngumiti siya sa akin. That genuine smile that kept me swooning. He was beyond gorgeous. You just have to look at his stunning dark eyes and you would know that you were under his spell. Everything about him was created to make an enchanted fairy tale. He was the perfect villain Prince only a Dark Fairytale could offer.

Stay with me and you ll be safe. Even his voice was captivating. I couldn t help but close my eyes. I felt his fingers through my hair, playing with each strand.

I should be with you, I whispered when he tucked a loose hair behind my ear. This time, he became serious. I saw his face inching towards mine closer and closer and I closed my eyes, anticipating his kiss.

Subalit isang tinig ang tila sumisigaw sa utak ko. It was like an alarm clock. It was annoyingly demanding me to be awake. Oh, crap. Kung ganun ay panaginip lang ito? Unti-unti kong naramdaman ang sarili kong nagigising. At isa ito sa pinakamasamang gising na naranasan ko. My head was achingly throbbing. It was also hard to breathe. My body felt weak and exhausted and moving a finger seemed to be impossible. Agad kong naalala kung saang sitwasyon ako naroon. Uh. Elixir of Life. It could give you dreams that you wanted to have. To fulfill your deepest desires. So tell me, iyon ba talaga ang gusto ko?

The test failed Naririnig ko na rin ang mga boses sa paligid ko. They seemed frustrated. Hindi ko alam kung lumipas na ba ang isang buong araw. Pakiramdam ko, pagod na pagod ako. All I wanted was rest. Gusto kong muling matulog. Gusto kong bumalik sa panaginip na iyon.

Ilang beses na nating na-review ang data

She s so tough really tough

Ilang tests kaya ang kakayanin niya?

Of course. They were talking about me. Apparently, I was once again the lucky human tester here.

Do it again, utos ng isang tinig. Wala nang muling nagsalita. Naramdaman kong ipinagpapatuloy nila ang kung anumang ini-uutos sa kanila. I didn t even want to open my eyes. I just wanted to stay in this calm darkness. But something was urging me to do the opposite. It was urging me to wake up. And so I used all my energy to do it.

Sa una ay liwanag lang ang naaaninag ko. At sa ilan pang pagkurap ay unti-unti nang lumilinaw ang paligid. I was still on the sixth floor. Inside a big box made of glass. Mukhang lahat ay abala samantalang ako ay

nakahandusay sa sahig. Of course, I was their own personal guinea pig to test. Life could sometimes do terrible things.

Pinilit kong gumalaw subalit ang pinakamadaling bagay lang sa mga oras na ito ay ang pagkurap ng aking mga mata. Hindi ko alam kung ilang oras akong nanatili sa ganung posisyon. Kahit ang normal na paghinga ay mahirap gawin. Bahagya akong naalerto nang mapansin kong nagkakaroon ng pagtatalo ang mga taong naka-puti. Lumahok na rin sa diskusyon ang ilang naka-itim na coat at maskara. Maya-maya pa ay pumasok na ang tatlo sa kanila sa bubog na kahong kinalalagyan ko. Ang isa ay matangkad na naka-itim na tuxedo. Ang dalawa ay nakaputing laboratory gown. They still seemed to be arguing nang lumapit sa akin.

If we use her again, she ll die, narinig kong wika ng babaeng nakaputi. Dr. Mitton, the one with the sad and very short love story. All this time, I knew she was trying to save me. The broken saving the one who was bound to break. Gusto kong tawanan ang senaryong iyon but I couldn t move a muscle aside from my eyelids.

There s nothing we can do about that. We need to test the accuracy of that hypothesis. And I have someone out there who is willing to join this game for the last time, wika ng naka-itim na coat. He was another creepy guy. Po-protesta pa sana si Dr. Mitton subalit muling bumukas ang kulungan ko at pumasok ang grupo ng mga naka-itim na maskara. They were dragging someone violently. They threw him on the floor. I felt tears on my cheeks when I saw who it was and how bad his situation looked. The man from the vivid dream I had just a while ago was severely tortured. He seemed tired but the intensity and danger in his eyes were never changing. Dark eyes that stared back at me.

What did you do to her? Mababa ang boses at habol-hiningang tanong niya. Hindi maikakaila ang labis na galit nang magpumilit siyang lumapit sa kinaroroonan ko. Subalit magkakasunod na sipa ang tinamo niya mula sa mga lalaking nagdala sa kaniya sa kulungan ko. I wanted to scream at them to stop it but I couldn t. Why would he do this? He is Van Freniere! Why would he let himself suffer like this? Hindi ko alam kung nababasa na ba ng mga luha ang pisngi ko dahil wala akong maramdaman maliban sa paghapdi ng aking mga mata.

I saw the man in black with the doctors clap his hands.

This is why I like Romeo and Juliet. It s tragic, bloody and pitiful. They loved each other unconditionally. And they also end up killing one another. I can t wait to see our Juliet kill her Romeo, he said and I internally froze. Was he planning to No! No! No, please! No! Gusto kong magmakaawa na huwag nilang gawin iyon. Na huwag nilang ipapagawa sa akin yun! How could I do that?!

I looked at my co-hostage helplessly. He stared back at me. I knew we were thinking the same thing. Could I do that? Could I possibly do that under the influence of some d mning drug? Was the Elixir of Life strong enough to make me do that horrible thing? I wanted to escape. Bakit sa mga ganitong desperate times ay hindi ko magamit ang pinagmamayabang kong lakas? Sa lahat ng pwedeng mangyari, this was the worst. In this situation, we would both die. Giovanni Freniere would be killed. By me. Killing him with my own bare hands I couldn t do that right? I wouldn t do that, right? There was no way I would waste my one d mn shot in a lifetime like that! No matter how enchanting the love story of those stupid star-crossed lovers was, we would never be like that. I could never be Juliet and he could never be Romeo. We shouldn t be ending like this! If only Romeo and Juliet knew how to appreciate life, they wouldn t commit suicide. They would have a better ending than that.

Subalit walang balak tumigil ang oras at pigilin ang mga masamang mangyayari. Lumapit ang isang doktor na kasama ni Dr. Charlotte Mitton at hinawi ang buhok ko na nagtatago sa aking leeg. Just how many pricks of needles did I get on my neck? Ilang sandali pa ay naramdaman ko na ang pagbaon ng karayom sa leeg ko. I felt the agonizing pain as my body tried to fight the EOL. Nararamdaman ko rin ang tila paghiwalay ko sa kasalukuyan. I felt the familiar sensation of having my body move without my permission. I was doing something I shouldn t be doing. But I couldn t stop it. Pinilit kong bumalik sa kasalukuyan. Pinilit kong gisingin ang sarili ko sa mala-zombie-ng estado na dala ng Elixir of Life. I internally closed my eyes and tried waking up. How ironic that I was trying to wake up by closing my eyes. The reality could be so tragic that it was so unbelievable. I knew there was no escaping only fighting. And I needed to save him. I

needed to save my one d mn shot in a lifetime. I needed to save Van from me.

With that, I started to utter a sound. V-V That was incomprehensible but it was the only word I could manage right now. It was the only name I know right this moment. V-Van I said it! I whispered it. I whispered it to the air. I whispered it to the mere darkness.

Van Bulong kong muli. Crap! I should try louder! Van. I heard my own voice. Mas tumindi ang sakit na nararamdaman ko sa ulo and I felt my body going down.

Stop it! STOP IT! PLEASE, SUMMER! PLEASE, PLEASE STOP IT! I could hear his voice screaming. Tanging ang boses lang na iyon ang gusto kong marinig. I could listen to that voice forever. Pero hindi ako makukuntento sa boses lang. I wanted to see him. After all, he was the reason why I went back. At saka ko pinilit imulat ang aking mga mata.

She s coming back Narinig kong wika ng isang tinig.

DON T TOUCH HER! I heard his desperate voice again. I really wanted to see him so by using all my strength, I worked on my eyelids. And I did. I had my eyes wide open in an instant.

Sa una ay tanging puti lamang ang nakikita ko. Hindi ako kumurap at hinihintay ko lang na mabuo ang mga pigura sa paningin ko. I saw figures but there was only one that stood out from among them. He was the most wonderful view even at his worst. We were both kneeling on the floor, face to face with each other. I could see his tears while he was looking at me. Van Freniere was crying Van Freniere of the Freniere Mafia was shedding tears for me. The most dangerous person in the planet looked so helpless and desperate in front of me.

Van Mahina kong sabi at nang tingnan ko ang sarili kong mga kamay, nakakita ako ng dugo. Maraming dugo. I was holding a Swiss knife. It was then I realized that I was cutting my own arms. Well, I did something like this before, right? I stopped myself from doing something I didn t want to do by hurting my body. I had to hurt myself so I could go back to reality.

Van Tangi ko muling nasabi. I wanted to ask him if I did something to hurt him. If I did something that made him cry. Maybe I did. Sorry, wika ko.

His voice was tight when he talked. Stop, Summer. Don t hurt yourself anymore. I can tolerate all types of pain but I can never take how painful it is to see you hurt yourself like that. Oh my God! I swear! Just get me out of these ropes! Just get me out of this d mn f cking ropes! Sagot niya. Another mask from Van Freniere just unraveled. With that, I crumpled on the floor.

Wow! Our Juliet is really strong! Well, let s do this again? The masked man announced.

No! Malakas na tutol ni Van. Everyone stopped on their tracks and waited for him. I will tell you now, seryoso niyang sabi. Mukhang nakuha ni Van ang interes ng lahat. Everyone looked at him questioningly and with curiosity.

Finally! The man in black coat chuckled. So this is really how Romeo breaks, eh? Through his Juliet! Ah young love Ngumiti siya kay Van.
So, young Romeo tell me a story. This guy had been really pissing me off.

Van glared at him. The Black Notebook. The Freniere Mafia s List. The name of the person who was erased from that list.

Agad na lumapit sa kaniya ang lalaking iyon. Who, Giovanni Freniere? Who was the only person whose name was ever erased from your list? Tanong nito kay Van. Van glanced at my limp body to the floor and returned his deadly glare to the man.

Samuel Leondale. He was the person erased from the list in the Black Notebook, malinaw na sabi ni Van.

I couldn t understand anything. Samuel Leondale. That was the only thing that registered on my mind. My dad, what was up with my dad? Matagal na katahimikan ang sumunod. I knew that everyone was thinking. I could also

sense the fear behind Dr. Charlotte Mitton s mask. Everyone was processing this information.

Let s go. Let s inform the Stones, maya-maya ay wika nito at saka sumunod na lumabas ang mga nakamaskara kasama ang dalawa pang doktor.

I m sorry, Summer, narinig kong sabi ni Van but I just smiled at him. I wanted to ask him questions but I was still too tired.

Isang oras ang lumipas nang may muling pumasok na nakaputing labgown at nakamaskara. Van was sitting at the floor while I was still slumped on it beside him. Napatingin kami sa dumating. His stand and poise looked familiar to me. Apparently, Van thought so, too.

Stupid, bulong ni Van nang lumapit ang taong iyon sa akin.

Oh, shit! Summer, are you okay? Tanong nito.

Now I was certain who it was. Didn t we just have a fake break up?

My fake boyfriend came back for me.

Chapter 48: Farewell, My Romeo

Get her out of here, mahinang wika ni Van.

I frowned. If I only got enough strength, I would protest. Patuloy lang si Jin sa pagpapanggap na ini-examine ako tulad ng ginagawa ng ibang mga naroon sa tuwing pumapasok sila sa bubog kong kulungan. Kung ibang tao lang ang makakakita sa kaniya, malamang na hindi siya makilala. He was wearing a white laboratory dress partnered with thick black, nerdy glasses. Gusto ko siyang tanungin kung paano niya nagawang makapasok rito. I wanted to ask him why the hell he came back. Subalit ang pagsasalita ay hinihingi ang natitira kong lakas. Wala akong magawa kundi panuorin na lang ang lahat, ang nangyayari at ang mga mangyayari.

Of course, I ll get her out of here, mahina ring sagot ni Jin habang lihim na tinitingnan ang paligid.

If you let her go back again I will kill you, mahina at mababa ang boses na pagbabanta ni Van. Kung pagmamasdan siguro mula sa labas, malamang walang makakapansin na nag-uusap ang dalawa.

Everyone outside this stupid box seemed to be busy and had no clue of what was happening. Mas kaunti ang mga naroon ngayon dahil mukhang may pag-uusap na nagaganap sa ibang parte ng lugar. At sigurado ako sa bagay na pinagdidiskusyunan nila. My dad. If I wasn t mistaken, there was a reason why I was studying here in Montello High. Hindi lang nagkataon na wala nang school sa listahan ni Daddy na pwede kong pasukan. Thinking about the reason why was unfortunately increasing my headache and dizziness. And to make it worse, did I just hear about him being the erased person on the list of Mafia Freniere s Black Notebook? Uh, crap. What was happening? I want answers.

Muling bumalik sa kasalukuyan ang isipan ko nang maramdaman ko ang katawan kong umangat sa sahig. Jin carried me, bridal style. I really felt so helpless. Isa pang taong nakaputi ang pumasok at binuksan ang pinto para sa paglabas namin. I recognized her as Dr. Mitton. I wondered if she knew all the things about my Dad. I wondered if she had all the answers I wanted.

We don t have time. Kailangan na nating makaalis bago pa matapos ang pagpupulong at bumalik ang lahat. We need to warn Samuel, wika niya. Nagsimulang bumilis ang tibok ng puso ko at mas bumangon ang aking kaba nang isara nila ang pinto at maiwan si Van sa bubog na kulungan.

No! Oh, my God, no! This couldn t be happening! I came back for him. Then why the heck was I leaving without him? Gusto kong kumawala sa bisig ni Jin subalit mabagal ang pagbalik ng lakas ko. Crap! I wanted to stay! It didn t matter to me how dangerous the situation was, I still wanted to stay! Everyone may tell me I was stupid and not thinking at all because of the stunts I had been doing. The hell with that! They were not me! Alam kong umiiyak na ako sa sobrang frustration at disappointment. Nilingon ko siya habang papalayo kami. He stared back at me at looked content to see me getting out of that place.

Why the hell should it be him? Gusto kong sumigaw at sabihin sa kaniyang mas gusto kong manatili kasama siya.

I know you want to go back for him again. But the ropes around him and the shackles would take time. Isa pa, alam kong ito rin ang nais niyang mangyari ang mailayo ka rito, wika ni Jin habang bumababa kami ng hagdan papuntang 5th floor. Mabilis silang tumatakbo kasama ni Dr. Mitton at mukhang hindi niya iniinda ang bigat ko. Probably all those adrenaline rush. When death was just behind you, of course, you must run away like hell.

We ran the stairs down to the 4th floor

3rd floor

2nd floor

Oh, crap. This looked like a twisted computer game. It was just that instead of reaching the top, we had to reach down. Narating namin ang unang palapag. Lahat ng mga estudyanteng naroon ay nakatulala lang. They looked awful now. They physically looked exhausted. Hindi ko maiwasang hindi maawa sa kanila. They were being used involuntarily. These were all inhumanly stupid.

Time We don t have time! Wika ni Dr. Mitton. She seemed nervous, too. Walang pumansin sa aming mga Frankensteins. Mukhang wala silang pakiramdam sa paligid nila. Malapit na kami sa may entrance ng Montello Main Building nang isang nakamaskara ang humarang sa daraanan namin.

At saan niyo balak dalhin ang human tester? Tanong nito habang itinututok ang hawak na baril sa amin. We immediately froze. I felt all of Jin s muscles tense up. Pinagmasdan niya sina Dr. Mitton at Jin. Oh, we are so prepared for dealing with traitors, aniya at ikinasa ang baril. We were waiting for his first deadly shot subalit hindi na iyon naganap. Sa halip ay isang mabilis na nilalang ang sumulpot mula sa likuran nito at gamit ang isang baseball bat ay hinataw ang taong nakamaskara sa ulo, dahilan upang agad itong mawalan ng malay.

We re not called the School of Monsters for nothing, wika ni Trinity habang tinitingnan ang lalaking walang malay. The rest of the student council is escaping through the Nightwoods. I just came back to check…

Naputol ang sasabihin niya nang hindi makita ng kaniyang paningin ang taong hinahanap.

No time for stupid moves, Trinity. Let s go! Wika ni Jin nang mahulaan kung ano ang nasa isip ni Trinity. Ipinagpatuloy niya ang pagtakbo. Tahimik na sumunod si Dr. Mitton. We were sprinting on the dull school yard. The coldness of December made me shiver.

I thought you had gotten help, maya-maya ay banggit ni Trinity.

We did. But no one believed us. Akala nila isa lang kaming mga kumpol ng gangsters who think it s fun to play pranks with the authorities. Isa pa, when they called the school, the communication was already up and someone from the office said that everything was just working well, sagot ni Jin.

E than Mahina kong banggit. Siya ang unang pumasok sa utak ko nang marinig ko ang sinabi ni Jin.

That idiot is a traitor! He locked us up inside the student council room! I just ruined my nails trying to break down the door! Trinity was furious and rightly so. Of course, you should never underestimate anyone from this school.

Nagtama naman ang paningin namin ni Dr. Mitton. Marami akong gustong itanong sa kaniya. Gusto kong malaman ang tungkol sa huli niyang binanggit. But I was still weak to voice everything out so I just mouthed, Who are you? With my dad? Hindi ko alam kung naintindihan niya subalit sumagot siya.

There s no need to tell you who I am. But your Dad was the most brilliant man I ve ever met, ngumiti siya sa akin. Nobody said anything. They were waiting for me to answer.

Black N-notebook? Kunot-noo kong tanong. Gusto kong malaman ang tungkol doon. Gusto kong malaman ang totoo. Isa pa, I could feel my body recovering quicker now. I could feel myself getting more and more alert.

Napawi ang ngiti sa mukha ni Dr. Charlotte Mitton. Mukhang wala siyang balak sagutin ang tanong ko.

Please Mahina kong paki-usap.

Huminga siya ng malalim. He was a genius when he got transferred to Montello High, panimula niya. Gusto kong sumang-ayon at sabihing, Yes, he is. You should also meet my sister. We we created the concept of Elixir of Life with the intent of seeing the most desirable thing of our hearts. At first, it was magical. It was enchanting and unbelievable. But it was also beautifully forbidden. It was not natural and it will affect the balance of everything. Isipin mo na lang. With EOL, everything would want to remain living in a dream! So we decided to stop it. Subalit maraming illegal na organisasyon na ang nagka-interes. The Freniere Mafia was against it and saw Samuel as a threat a Victor Frankenstein who created a monster. So they wanted to eliminate him. They put him on the list.

Walang umimik sa amin. Everything was just too much too take. My father created the concept of EOL. Sinabi niyang nag-aral siya sa Montello High pero hindi ko inaasahang ganito pala ang nakaraan niya. Elixir of Life, apparently, was a lifetime project. Who would have known that it started because of a once-wishful love story?

He never wanted to leave his family. So I helped him in creating the Antidote. Who would have known that the very same antidote would save his own daughter

Gusto kong tumigil kami sa pagtakbo at tumulala sa isang tabi habang umiiyak. My dad saved me Even at this hopeless state, he still tried to save me.

The Elixir of Life put his name on the Black Notebook. The Antidote removed his name from it. You know, sometimes, villains have the most reasonable motives, dagdag pa ni Dr. Mitton.

Wala pa ring nagsalita. Patuloy lang kami sa pagtakbo. I was so proud of my father. Elixir of Life was his biggest mistake at dumating sa punto na tanging kaparusahan na lang ang haharapin niya. But all this time, he fought

for us. Nagawa niyang itama ang pagkakamali niya because he didn t want to forsake his family. So he made the Antidote. And because of that, he was the only person who was removed from the Black Notebook.

Malapit na kami sa bukana ng Nightwoods. Nauuna si Trinity, sunod si Dr. Charlotte Mitton habang nasa huli kami ni Jin. He was probably exhausted right now because of carrying me for too long. Subalit kung pagod man siya ay hindi niya iyong ipinapakita. My hope was rising as my heart was breaking. I still wanted to go back. At mukhang pinakinggan iyon ng tadhana gamit ang tila masamang biro dahil isang putok ng baril ang puma-ilanlang sa paligid. Bago pa tuluyang magregister ang nangyari ay bumagsak si Jin habang marahas ang paggulong ko sa lupa.

Oh, crap! No! Please, not like this!

Ah, shit! Jin cursed as he held on to his right leg. Another shot and it hit his right arm.

Jin! Gamit ang natitirang lakas kong tawag sa pangalan niya. I couldn t move. I couldn t crawl. Malinaw na ang utak ko pero hindi ang katawan ko. D mn it, EOL! Jin, please Hindi ko alam kung naiintindihan niya ang pagmamakaawa ko. I was begging him not to die. Not today. Not ever. Not because of me! He just looked at me apologetically and firmly and I begged heaven to spare him.

D mn, it actually hurts! And it s dirty, he cursed. Even at a time like this, he still doesn t change.

Nakita ko ang paglapit ng grupo ng mga nakamaskara na mukhang nagmula sa Montello Main Building. Pinangungunahan ni Ephraim Novou at Ethan Montreal. I could see them behind their masks. Pinagigitnaan nila ang isang matangkad na lalaki na hindi ko masyadong mapagsino dahil sa distansya nila. He was holding his gun up. Apparently, he was the one who shot Jin. I couldn t believe these people! They could stand there watching people bleed because of them! They re inhumanly despicable!

Mula naman sa Nightwoods ay parehong bumalik sina Dr. Mitton at Trinity. Dr. Charlotte tried to hurl Jin up but the man took another shot as I looked

on helplessly. Bumagsak si Jin and I saw Dr. Charlotte s face froze up as a streak of blood drip from the corner of her mouth. Trinity shrieked. I saw a streak of blood from Dr. Charlotte s chest. This time, I really cried. Oh, my God! How could they do this? We watched as she fell to the ground next to Jin, breathing hard and struggling to live.

Agad na nakabawi si Trinity at pinilit niya akong buhatin. Malayo pa rin ang grupo ng mga nakamaskara. The man tried to shot at us subalit bunga ng adrenaline rush ay nakaiwas ni Trinity. Binalikan niya ako and tried to drag me towards the Nightwoods.

Hold on, Summer! I ll get you out of here! Determinado niyang sabi. That was when I proved to myself that she was not just a bitch. She was brave in her own way. Well, everyone had their own story to tell. But it wouldn t save us. We would never make it unless

Run, Trinity, halos bulong kong sabi.

What?! No! Tutol niya. She was also crying. Who wouldn t? The situation was just so devastating.

You go. I.. can t, wika ko. Mukha namang naisip rin niya ang gusto kong mangyari. She can run faster kung hindi ako kasama sa ganitong kundisyon. There was a good chance that she d be able to make it.

Are you sure? I I hate you because Van sees you But, I don t I never wanted you dead, umiiyak niyang sabi.

I gave her a faint smile. Too bad. No sarcastic remarks this time.

I know Find Arturia Henrietta Arturia Hindi ko alam kung bakit siya ang bigla kong naisip. It just came to me in an instant. Tumango si Trinity.

I will, I promise. Mabilis siyang tumakbo pabalik sa Nightwoods.

Dalawang nakamaskarang lalaki ang tumakbo upang habulin siya. The rest approached us as if they were just walking out on a normal day. Tila ba sigurado silang hindi na makakatakas ang mga bihag nila.

Arturia Montello He even sent his two daughters under the protection of two powerful schools Clever, isn t he? He always was Nahihirapang wika ni Dr. Mitton. Pinilit kong bumangon at gumapang palapit sa kaniya. She was smiling at me even when she was in great pain. And that made me cried harder.

Tell him I will always love him. Tell him I had no regrets for that sad love story of us Tell him I m keeping the memories Aniya habang habol ang paghinga. Patuloy lang ang luha ko at hindi ko magawang magsalita. Tumango na lang ako sa sinabi niya. She seemed content at my response. Make a better story, Summer, wika niya and she closed her eyes. That was when my cries became louder. It was the constant thing about death. It was always sad and painful. She might have told me the shortest story that I ve ever heard but I will never forget it.

Hindi ko na namalayan o tinapunan ng pansin man lang ang grupong pumalibot sa amin. I saw them carry Jin. He looked like he was also crying hard. He might have been speechless of everything of pain and of sadness. And then Ethan tore me away from Dr. Mitton s dead body. He still seemed to be careful of handling me and when I looked at his eyes, I knew something was troubling him, too.

I thought I was good at shooting targets. When I was still in Germany, it was my noblest hobby.

I looked at the one who spoke. I knew without a doubt that he was the one behind everything. He was the big person on top all this. He was the leader of the Stones Organization. And that was when everything occurred to me. Fortunately, the antidote was still keeping me sane to think. The black boxes kaya pala walang kahirap-hirap na naipapasok iyon as Montello High. The visitors who had the authority to allow them inside the school? Sa simula pa lang, siya na ang kumokontrol ng mga pangyayari. He collected all the pieces he needed. Van was the nearest connected to the untouchable Mafia Freniere. He needed him para malaman ang taong pinagmulan ng Elixir of Life. My Dad, the one they needed, the one who could perfect the EOL Project. While I was the tough human tester. At ngayong alam na ng taong ito ang tungkol sa aking ama, I wondered what he would do.

Let s just kill them. I ll take the girl, wika ni Ephraim Novou at akmang lalapit sa akin. But Ethan glared at him.

Patience, Ephraim. We can still use the daughter of Samuel Leondale. Besides, it s not fun if the pieces are not complete. As for that young man Bumaling ang taong iyon kay Jin. We can use him for something else Take him back and keep him with the Freniere boy Wika nito. Agad siyang sinunod ng mga nakamaskarang naroon.

I looked at Jin helplessly as they dragged him away. He was covered in blood but he was still conscious. I could feel anger bubbling up inside me. You Don t take off your mask I could feel myself struggling with anger in my voice. Tumingin siya sa akin at saka humalakhak ng malakas.

Oh, Miss Leondale. I was really worried that you might solve the puzzle and get to me. Pero sa tingin ko, wala namang dahilan upang suotin ko pa ito. Tinanggal niya ang kaniyang maskara. I was right. Now his mask was off and I would never forget his face.

I am Stones. The meaning of my name is Stone, nakangisi niyang pakilala. He was the stinking devil behind this mess. But of course, his name was the German word for stone.

Principal Steins. The leader of the Stones Organization. Who would have f cking thought that?

Chapter 49: Achilles Heel

Van seemed really frustrated when he saw us being literally thrown to the ground. Well, Jin was. Ethan just carefully laid me down the cold, white tiles as if I was nothing more than fragile china compared to Jin s bloodied body. This time, medyo naiipon ko na ang nagbabalik kong lakas kung kaya t pinilit kong alalayan si Jin na makatayo subalit hindi ko iyon masyadong ipinahalata.

Where s the doctor? Mahinang tanong ni Van. Hindi ako nakasagot. Tumungo lang ako.

Dead, sagot ni Jin na iniinda ang kanang braso at binti niya. It was still bleeding. Masyado nang maraming dugo ang nawawala sa kaniya at kailangan na itong maagapan. Subalit bago pa ako makapagkomento tungkol sa sugat niya ay pumasok na si Principal Steins kasama si Ephraim Novou.

Van glared at the principal as if he already understands everything. The biggest snake, gigil niyang sabi. He was now trying to kill the older man with his deadly glare.

Akala ko ay hindi na kita makukuha dahil napakaperpekto ng isang Giovanni Freniere. Walang butas. Walang kahinaan. Until this girl transferred to Montello High. Perfect timing, wasn t it? Wika nito. Steins used me. And I had always hated the feeling of being used. At tingnan mo nga naman kung gaanong mapaglaro ang tadhana. Our human tester is actually the daughter of the man behind the concept of Elixir of Life. Kaunting panahon na lang at mapeperpekto ko na ang Project EOL. I just have to get to your father by using you. He pointed at me.

You are not going to touch my family!!! Galit at may diin kong sabi. I would never let him use me again. Not against my Dad.

Oh, really? But I almost got to your sister. Have you forgotten my messages in the box? Nang-iinsulto ang ngiti niya. Of all the people here, he had the most deceitful mask. Maybe that s the way it was. You should put an elegant mask to hide the beast inside of you. And apparently, he did it well. And while waiting for your beloved father Lumapit si Steins sa kinaroroonan ko. Pinilit ni Jin na itago ako sa likod niya subalit isang sipa ang ibinigay sa kaniya ng pinuno ng Stones, dahilan upang mamilipit siya sa sakit.

Ugh!

Jin! You, monster! Sigaw ko nang makalapit sa akin ang principal ng Montello.

Bakit hindi natin ituloy ang eksperimento? Tanong sa akin ni Steins. Sa pagkakataong iyon ay tila gusto ko nang mawalan ng pag-asa.

They didn t know about the antidote. Ang alam lang nila ay nagtataglay ako ng malupit na Immune System. But I knew that after restoring my strength, the antidote was going to wear out. Iyon ang ibig sabihin ni Dr. Mitton sa time. And I knew that mine was up. Awtomatiko akong napatingin kay Van. He seemed to understand it, too, because he looked at me with grieving expression.

Pumasok ang dalawang nakaputing tao upang ihanda ako sa isa na namang eksperimento. Nang akma na nila akong hahawakan ay nagprotesta si Van.

No! Please! Take me! Kill me instead of her! He said.

He actually said please to these monsters. Kusang nalaglag ang luha ko nang sabihin niya iyon. I was crying for him. I was hurting for him. So everything would still end like a stupid rip-off Romeo and Juliet s scenario? But why him? Why us? His heart had already been broken by so many tragedies in his life. He had lost too much. His mom, his brother, his friend s betrayal and now me. I wished I could try to save it by picking all the pieces and mold it into my own heart. I wished I still had the chance to tell him that I like him I like him so much that I couldn t breathe. But maybe we would still be ending up broken because of holding our own feelings.

That s a tempting offer from a powerful Freniere. But I want you sane and alert when I finally give you your death, sagot ni Steins. What? He was going to kill Van? Halos nahirapan akong pigilan ang sarili kong sugurin siya. But I shouldn t. Kailangan kong ipunin ang unti-unti kong nagbabalik na lakas. Kailangan kong manatiling mahina.

Then take me.

Pare-pareho kaming lumingon sa nagsalita. Blood rang in my ears at agad akong nagprotesta. No! Not Jin!

Brilliant idea! Let s give our official human tester a break and play with this one for a moment. Tutal naman, hindi rin naman ito magtatagal, sang-ayon ni Steins na naging dahilan ng sunud-sunod kong pag-iling at pagkapit ng mahigpit sa braso ni Jin.

Jin Please No! Patuloy na dumadaloy ang luha ko. Sa totoo lang, hindi ko akalain na may tubig pa akong iluluha matapos ang pagpapahirap nila sa akin. He just smiled at me sadly.

Makikipagkasundo ako kay Kamatayan para lang iligtas ka, mahinang sabi niya. It was almost a whisper but I could clearly hear it. I couldn t let him go. I couldn t lose anyone anymore. I couldn t, after Tyler I tried to hold on to him as they grabbed him by his shoulders. Hindi ko siya binitawan kahit na nakakaladkad na ang nanghihina ko pang katawan sa sahig. Subalit isang sipa sa sikmura ang ibinigay sa akin ni Ephraim Novou na naging dahilan ng pagbitaw ko kay Jin.

Leave her alone! Protesta ni Jin pero hindi siya pinansin nito.

You, pest! You will pay! You will pay with every breath that you had! I will reduce all the Novous to ashes! Galit na sigaw ni Van kasabay ng pagprotesta ni Jin. I just curled in a ball because of the surging pain. But pain was good, right? That means I was not one of the unfeeling Frankensteins. I was in pain. That means I was still alive. So was Jin, even though he was covered in blood. So was Van, even though he was tied up and tortured for just watching everything.

At mukhang ikinatutuwa talaga ni Ephraim Novou ang pagtulak ng sukdulan kay Van dahil marahas niyang hinila ang buhok ko. Van growled. Mas lumapad ang ngisi ni Ephraim Novou dahil inilabas niya ang kaniyang baril at itinutok sa akin.

No! No! Don t! Malakas na protesta ni Van. Don t Please Patuloy niya sa mahina at nakiki-usap na boses.

Woman… Woman They are every man s Achilles Heel. Steins seemed to be amused. Stop playing, Ephraim. You re in the middle of my class, dagdag niya. Walang nagawa si Ephraim kundi itulak ako sa tabi ni Van. Van tried to catch me with his body upang hindi ako muling bumagsak sa sahig.

Summer Mahinang tawag ni Van sa pangalan ko. His voice sounded like the most wonderful music in this chaotic scenario. Subalit hindi ko sinagot

ang boses na iyon. Nakatingin lang ako sa taong inilalagay nila ngayon sa dating kinapupwestuhan ko. Para lang kaming nasa palabas. Siya ang nasa entablado at kami ang mga manunuod. Hindi ko mapigilan ang luha ko nang magtama ang mga mata namin. One of the men in the white lab injected him with a blue liquid. He seemed as if he was just staring at me but he wasn t moving at all. Hindi ko na naitago ang paghikbi ko nang maging blangko ang paningin ng mga matang nakatingin sa akin.

Jin Jin Tawag ko sa pangalan niya sa pagitan ng aking paghikbi. His eyes which always looked at me playfully were now nothing but a blank glass. I think that whatever sanity left in me was disappearing. I didn t care about my surroundings anymore. I just wanted to grieve. But one voice kept me holding on to the painful reality.

Summer. Van called my name. It must be so tragic. But if I had to face tragedy just to be by his side, then I will. Lumuluha akong lumingon sa kaniya. Summer, I know how much pain you are in right now. I m sorry Mahina niyang sabi. Hindi ko siya maintindihan. How I wish I was not Giovanni Freniere! I should have listened to Algernon and Sebastian about falling for a woman! I should have stayed the way I was, no matter how dark it used to be. I should have killed this damn feeling in the first place! I m sorry. Hindi ko talaga siya maintindihan. Sobrang lungkot ng mga mata niya and I thought I saw a tear drop from his eye. I m sorry I did this to you, he said hopelessly.

Gamit ang naiipon kong lakas ay sinampal ko ang gwapo niyang mukha. Oh, God. He was already tortured and battered, I know, but I just had to shake him up. Tila nagising naman siya.

What the hell! Nagpipigil sa inis niyang wika nang makabawi sa pagkabigla. What could I do? I couldn t help it! Hindi ko talaga siya maintindihan, eh!

You are confessing to me and so damnably ruining it at the same time by saying sorry! I don t understand why you are apologizing. Stop saying sorry! Halos pabulong ko nang sagot. Hindi siya nakapagsalita. He just looked dumbfounded. Now, it was his turn to lose his sanity. Binawi ko ang tingin ko at muling lumingon kay Jin. He still got that blank stare. But he

wasn t moving even though they were using a small device to make him move. Ayokong isipin ang pinakamalalang posibilidad na baka kaya hindi siya gumagalaw ay dahil No I couldn t think of it because it would take everything in me again.

Walang kwenta. Nasayang lang ang EOL, narinig kong komento nila.

Novou, Montreal Take care of everything here. I just need to check if that traitor, Dr. Charlotte Mitton, did her job and injected all my Frankensteins to refuel them, wika ni Steins at saka lumabas ng bubog na kulungan. Sumunod na rin ang dalawa palabas upang asikasuhin ang eksperimentasyon. Naiwan ako, si Van at si Jin na hindi pa rin gumagalaw.

It sucks to end up this way. Van seemed to be defeated.

I frowned at him. Well, I will never let myself end up this way without a fight. Pinakiramdaman ko muna ang sarili ko kung sapat na ba ang lakas ko upang sumubok muli at lumaban sa huling pagkakataon. I think I had the time I needed. Time. I think time wasn t worth gold. Time is worth a life. Inilagay ko ang kamay ko sa panloob na bulsa ng aking hoodie and felt the cold, dangerous and deadly little thing in there. I didn t even remember that I had it in me this whole time until I felt it when I was slumped earlier. Sa dami ng nangyari, nawala na ito sa isip ko.

Catherine del Valle Pabulong na hula ni Van. He was always right that it was annoying. It was hard to surprise him! Maybe this gun still held what Tyler had said. That if I liked Van, he would always protect me from the others.

Kung kaya nilang lokohin ang otoridad at walang magawa si Detective Penber dahil nakatali siya sa batas, may iba pang nilalang na nagtataglay ng higit pa sa common sense. Mas nakikita nila ang hindi nakikita ng iba. This was what Tyler told me. And I knew he was right. We were not yet check-mate!

Yeah, sang-ayon ni Van sa sinabi ko.

I just hope Trinity could reach her. She was the easiest Mafia Reaper to get in touch with.

Mukhang naiintindihan ni Van na si Henrietta ang tinutukoy ko. Nakakatawa na sa normal na sitwasyon, halos walang sense ang takbo ng usapan naming dalawa. But this time was different. It was amazing that we didn t need exact details to understand each other. Muling bumalik ang ekspresyon ni Van sa normal na Giovanni Freniere. Calm. Unfathomable. Dangerous. I couldn t even read his mind. Ugh! I d always hated this side of him. And I think, unconsciously and ironically, I went back to my old self, too. I couldn t give up, right? Not this time. Not when I had seen through Van s façade. I wanted to see more behind his mask.

Pull the handle upward. No, force it. Tyler won t give you that gun if he didn t think you re strong enough to use a Mafia Reaper s gun, pabulong at seryoso niyang sabi. Nagtataka ko siyang tiningnan subalit agad ko ring ginawa ang sinabi niya. I had to follow my guts. And it was yelling at me to trust him.

Pinilit kong i-angat ang handle o mas tamang sabihin na binali ko ang baril. Think of it. Paano ko mababali ang tila hindi man lang magasgasan na baril? They told me that it was the famous Catherine del Valle s gun and now they were asking me to break it? But yeah, trust him. Binali ko ang baril sa abot ng aking makakaya. And it actually did break. Kasabay niyon ay isang matalas na patalim ang lumabas mula rito. I silently gasped and almost dropped the weapon. Ano pa bang tinatago ng baril na ito?

You should have told me that it had a knife! I hissed at Van.

Just shut up, Summer, and get me out of this ropes! At isa pa, you should have told me in the first place that you had that with you all along! He hissed back. Ginawa ko ang ini-utos niya at palihim na hiniwa ang ilang hibla ng lubid sa katawan niya. Wow. This thing was really sharp. Maybe I should have told him earlier that I had it but hell! Sa dami ng nangyari, kahit ang bagay na ito ay hindi ko na naalala at naramdaman. Isa pa, I didn t really have the intention of using a gun. Ilang hibla pa ang naputol ko at awtomatikong lumuwag ang pagkakatali kay Van. Now, we just needed to deal with his shackles.

Hide it, utos niya at agad kong ibinalik ang baril sa normal at itinago muli ito sa loob ng aking jacket. Sakto namang pumasok ang nagtatalong sina Ethan at Ephraim.

Dude, you can t use your Vice President tone with me. Not with an outsider! Naiiritang wika ni Ephraim habang papalapit sa amin. Bumunot siya ng baril at itinutok ito sa akin. Was he really that hungry for my blood?

If you kill her, you will jeopardize the whole EOL Project. Steins said that we still need her! Galit ding wika ni Ethan at pinigil si Ephraim sa balikat. But in one swift movement, the assassin punched Ethan in the gut, causing him to stumble down. Ephraim aimed the gun back at me. Oh, no! Was I going to be killed again before we even make it?

I don t really care about the Elixir of Life. I just wanted to kill this two, nakangisi niyang sagot at saka ikinasa ang baril. But Van was faster and because his ropes were already loose, he was able to get up and gave Novou a hard kick in his stomach. Ephraim was caught in surprise but immediately recovered, too. He pointed his gun to Van and suddenly, my nightmare about the snake and a gun rushed vividly to my mind. This was the moment where he would be shot, right? A snake, a gun, Van and I. I know how it was going to end and I had to stop it.

Tumayo ako at tumakbo kay Van. I wrapped myself around him, shielding him with whatever was to come. Mariin kong ipinikit ang aking mga mata as I felt him stiffened and whispered, No! Hinintay ko ang aking katapusan. Subalit walang dumating. Lumingon ako and I saw Ethan standing behind Ephraim Novou. He had an empty syringe in his hand. Ephraim Novou just stared at us and I watched as his blank expression turned into a blank stare. Hindi ako makapaniwala. The snake just saved us.

Everyone outside the glass cage looked shocked and scared. Itinulak ni Ethan sa sahig ang nakatulalang si Ephraim Novou kasabay ng lihim na paghagis niya ng isang maliit na bagay sa direksyon namin. It was a key. I grabbed it and quickly unlocked Van s shackles.

I just set the monster free and the people in lab gowns outside our jail stepped back.

Agad na sinugod ni Van si Ethan at malakas na suntok sa mukha ang ibinigay niya rito , dahilan upang humagis ang katawan ni Ethan sa bubog na pader at dumugo ang ilong nito. Dali-dali kong pinigil si Van. Jeez!

Van! He just saved us! Wika ko. I thought he wasn t going to listen to me because of the look he was giving Ethan definitely meant that he would leave no one alive. But he did listen to me dahil hinawakan lang niya si Ethan sa kwelyo.

You re still a traitor, galit niyang banta kay Ethan.

I know, sagot nito.

Van dropped him and grabbed my hand. We ran towards the door. Saglit akong lumingon sa kinaroroonan ni Jin. I would get him back, I promised.

Walang nagtangkang humarang sa amin sa mga nakaputing laboratory gowns. Ang mga nakacoat at maskarang itim na humarang sa amin ay tila mga damo lang na hinawi ni Van. They never used a gun. I think it was prohibited in this area. That Novou was just a rebel that was why he was always with a gun. We ran towards the stairs again. Well, I didn t actually run but still. We were faster this time since Van was grabbing me. He ran like the wind and it was a mystery that I could keep up. And yet, I knew he would never leave me behind.

We quickly reached almost the entrance of the school. I hoped we can make it. We had to! Oh, God! Please. I think I had the shortest and fastest prayer: Help us, oh God! It was almost a whisper between my gasps and it never made a sound. I doubt even Van heard it. So will He hear me? Will He pay attention to my four-word-call? I knew I was undeserving but He was forgiving, right? So will He listen to my pained, incomprehensible voice?

We finally made it to the entrance but we had a sudden stop when we saw what was waiting for us. The students who had become Frankensteins were staring at us but there was something I don t know. I couldn t explain it. It was just a different and scarier feel. At tila mas dumami pa sila.

You can never escape us, wika ng boses na mula sa aming likuran. Lumingon kami ni Van sa pinagmulan naming entrance. There, standing, was the whole Stones Organization with their masks on, led by Principal Steins. Ethan and Ephraim Novou weren t with them, though. Hinigpitan ni Van ang kapit sa kamay ko at kinabig ako palapit sa kaniya. Was this how it will end? This was our last fight, right?

You ll have to get through me first before I let you touch her again, wika ni Van. Tumawa si Steins ng malakas. Ugh! Why do antagonists always have an irritating laugh?

I won t. Your schoolmates would do that for me, wika nito at may pinindot na device sa kamay niya. Muli naming binaling ang aming paningin sa mga estudyante. But they weren t moving at all. They were just staring at us.

Ano ng kalokohan ito?! Why is not working?! Napipikong boses ni Steins ang narinig namin. Hindi ko binawi ang paningin ko sa mga estudyante. Huling kita ko sa kanila, they seemed to be in an unconscious pain and tiredness. But now, they looked different. What is happening?!! Galit na sigaw ni Steins subalit hindi ko pa rin siya pinansin. And then I suddenly understood what was happening nang i-angat ng mga Frankensteins ang kanilang mga kanang kamay na hawak ang isang bagay.

God answered me. He probably never heard my voice. He must have heard my heart which was louder than any sound I could create. And maybe, my heart wanted flowers. Because these Frankensteins were holding out roses. They were each holding a gorgeous, black rose in their hands.

Black Rose.

Author s Note:

I won t say anything except Trust Me.

Soundtrack for this chapter:

Shouldn t be Good in Goodbye by Jason Walker

Terrible Things by Mayday Parade

+Siel Alstreim

Chapter 50: A Game of Chess

God apparently answered my shortest prayer. I wasn t sure if He was being romantic this time because He sent me flowers but I was grateful. He listened to the call of my heart. These dark roses were the brightest hope I could hold on to right now. And maybe, I was someone s hope, too, because I felt long fingers wrapping tightly against mine. Lumingon ako sa may-ari ng mga daliring iyon at alam kong nararamdaman din niya ang nararamdaman ko nang magtama ang mga mata namin.

This couldn t be happening! Frustrated at tila hindi makapaniwalang wika ni Principal Steins. I couldn t help but smirk on that. This old man still needed to learn some lessons.

Nakatingin pa rin ang mga Frankensteins sa amin but this time, they weren t all zombie-like. Tila alam nila ang kanilang ginagawa. They looked serious and determined now. They were not Frankensteins anymore. They were Montello High School Gangster students. At totoong mas dumami sila. That was when I recognized Zach, Makki, Trinity, Jamie and Mirden somewhere in the middle of the students. Suprisingly, they were with Detective Penber. But he wasn t wearing his police uniform. Nakita ko rin ang ilang mga estudyante mula sa cafeteria. They came back for us.

Agad na nakahuma ang mga miyembro ng Stones dahil tinutukan nila ang mga estudyante ng baril. At dahil nasa pagitan kami ng dalawang grupo, kasama kami na sasalo ng mga balang pakakawalan nila.

Well, I hate disobedient students, wika ni Principal Steins. To our surprise, someone answered from the group who were holding black roses.

Well, you shouldn t point your gun to kids especially when they are just holding black roses. It was Zach s voice. And then I remembered Jin. What was I going to tell Zach about him? Nag-iisip pa ako ng mga maaari pang mangyari nang tumuon ang atensyon naming lahat sa dahan-dahang

bumubukas na gate ng Montello High. Our school was finally being opened. Whoever was opening it, I had no idea. It was just slowly and mysteriously opening, leaving me breathless because of anticipation.

What was coming? There were monsters inside these gates. Montello High, while the gate was closed, became a nest of the biggest snake that I ve ever known. And something was coming up. It must mean that there were more monsters coming in. Montello High was really a lucky place. It was going to be a deadly and dangerous battle ground for monsters.

Stay near me, Summer. It s not just your long, lost friend Henrietta who s coming, wika ni Van at saka hinila ako ng mas palapit sa kaniya. I don t get him. He was shielding me from the Stones even as he wanted to cover me from what was coming.

She s not my long, lost friend, may diin kong sagot sa kaniya. Hindi na niya ako sinagot dahil tuluyan nang lumuwang ang pagbubukas ng tarangkahan. Sa una ay wala akong makita dahil sa distansya ng kinaroroonan namin. Malakas na ihip ng malamig na hangin lang ang aming nararamdaman. Why was this December breeze giving me terrible goosebumps? Nanatili lang ang lamig ng temperature. Uh. This school must have not gotten fresh air since it was locked down. Walang nagtangkang magsalita sa mga naroon. Ilang segundo pa ang lumipas at isang pigura ng malaking lalaki ang naglakad papasok ng gate. He looked familiar. Uh, of course. I knew him.

Oh, God! It s my Christmas Ball date! Bulalas ko nang mapagsino ang taong papalapit ngayon sa kumpol ng mga tao.

Van frowned beside me. You dated him? He asked. I rolled my eyes at him.

I needed a date for the Christmas ball, sagot ko at saka naalalang iniwan ko siya sa Arturia just to attend Montello High s Christmas Ball. And yeah. That invitation was a trick but I d gladly taken it. Siguro, kung uulitin ko man ang lahat, I d still go back and try to save this place.

Patuloy na naglakad ang seryoso at nakakatakot na nilalang na iyon patungo sa kinaroroonan namin. Normal lang na paglalakad na tila wala siyang anumang inaalala sa mundo. Hindi nagmamadali at hindi rin naman mabagal. Nang malapit na ang distansya niya sa amin ay sumigaw si Principal Steins.

Sino ka?! Masama ang tingin na tanong nito.

Napakabilis naman nila. Naunahan pa nila akong nakarating dito. Hay, naku. Hindi talaga masarap sa pakiramdam kapag hindi ka kumpleto, sabi ng malaking lalaki na tila iniinda talaga na nahuli siya sa kung anumang tinutukoy niya. And of course, he wasn t wearing any shirt. It must be one of his casual fashion style subalit tama siya. Tila nga may kulang sa kaniya.

Wala akong panahong makipagbalagtasan sa iyo. Ang sabi ko, sino ka? Galit at napipikong tanong ni Steins. Normal lang ang reaksyon ng nilalang na nakuha pang yumukod bilang panimula ng pagpapakilala sa sarili.

Ang aking ngalan ay Maximus Brown. Ang magandang binibining iyon At saka ako tinuro, ay niyaya ako sa isang pagtitipon. Subalit ako y nilisan niya nang walang paalam, tangay-tangay ang malaking bahagi ng aking pagkatao, seryosong sabi ni Old Max. What? Was I really that hot and gorgeous that even Old Max would fall for me? Oh, crap. Masamang tingin ang ibinigay sa akin ni Van.

You should have told me, mahina at inis niyang sabi.

What? Nagtataka ko ring tanong. Wag mong sabihing ngayon pa siya magseselos sa sitwasyon na ito?

First, you forgot about Catherine del Valle. And now, you seemed to have forgotten about Maximus Brown, too! Are you really this stupid? Naiiling niyang tanong.

I am not stupid, you Jerk! Inis kong sagot.

Muli tayong nagkita, nakababatang Freniere, wika muli ni Maximus Brown at naglakad sa hilera ng ilang mga kotse sa kalapit na parking lot.

Tumigil ka, Ginoo! Pagbabanta ni Principal Steins. Subalit hindi siya pinakinggan ni Old Max. Dire-diretso lang ang hunter ng Mafia patungo sa mga kotse. Tumigil ka o pagsisisihan mong hindi ka sumunod sa inutos ko! Sigaw ni Steins. I think I saw Van smirked. Hindi naman tumigil si Old Max at nanlaki ang mga mata ko nang huminto siya sa harap ng sasakyan ni Autumn. Ooops. Mukhang alam ko na kung ano ang tinutukoy niya bahagi ng pagkatao niya na dinala ko.

Isang malakas na putok ng baril ang halos bumingi sa pandinig ko. Tumama ito sa hubad na balikat ni Old Max. Everyone looked horribly shocked. Except for Van at hindi ako makapaniwalang ni hindi man lang niya iyon ininda. Hindi naman tuluyang bumaon ang bala ng baril, sa halip ay tila naka-ukit lang ito sa parte ng katawan niya na tila bigong makapasok at makagawa ng pinsala. Hindi lang iyon pinansin ni Old Max at sa halip ay binuksan ang likurang bahagi ng sasakyan ni Autumn.

Oh my God! He s not human! Is he a cyborg?! Mahina kong sabi. Well, cyborg is me, overreacting. But who wouldn t if a man like him could make gun shots look tame? Hindi rin maipaliwanag ang mga ekspresyong bumakas sa mga mukha ng Stones. And as if to show us the proper weapon to use, inilabas ni Max ang malaking machine gun mula sa kotse ni Autumn. The gun screamed Expendables movie. I heard gasps from almost everyone. Uh, crap! Hindi ko nga sinasadyang tangayin ang bahagi ng buhay niya. Ipinatong iyon ni Maximus Brown sa balikat at muling bumalik sa direksyon namin ni Van. This time, sabay-sabay na tumutok sa kaniya ang mga baril mula sa panig nila Principal Steins. Tumigil siya at tila duming tinanggal ang bala sa kaniyang balikat. It created a shallow, bleeding wound but definitely not fatal.

Ang nakamamatay na sandata ay hindi niyo dapat itinututok sa maling direksyon, wika ni Max. I frowned. Why did he keep giving us riddles? If it was possible, Van held me closer to him.

Isang tinig mula sa mga estudyanteng may dalang itim na rosas ang nagsalita. H-hey where is that Henrietta woman? Nanginginig ang boses at tila kinakabahang tanong ni Trinity. Oh, I was indebted to this girl.

Ngumisi sa kaniya si Old Max. Ako na ang pinakahuli sa kanilang dumating. Then it was when I realized that the atmosphere suddenly became colder. I looked at Van and he was intently looking at the edges of the school. What is there?

No way They re all here I looked at Detective Penber who was also looking around the edges of the school. He looked as if he just made the breaking discovery of humans living in Mars. The Mafia reapers. They re all here Saka ko naisipang tumingin din sa paligid at wala sa isip na napahigpit ang kapit ko sa kamay ni Van. As if on cue, shadows around the edges of the school started moving. In a few short moments, the game changed. All of them appeared and I caught my breath.

Mafia reapers Bulong ni Van. Nakaramdam ako ng takot at pangingilabot. They were surrounding us. Numbers of people who looked different and distinctive from each other. And they looked beautiful. Beautiful but deadly. You couldn t help but look at them but it would be fatal, like staring at the windows of Death. They were all watching us. And one of them stood out from my attention. Standing with her snow-white skin and long, black hair was Henrietta Arturia. Still gorgeous as ever. Only deadlier this time. At malapit sa kaniya ang isang secured na grupo. This group was the thing of your nightmares.

H-how bakas ang matinding takot, frustration at pagkalito sa mukha ni Principal Steins. We had the same question, actually. How did they do that? Since when were they here inside the school, surrounding us? And how did we never notice their entrance? Were this some ninja skills of Mafia reapers?

Hey, little brother! You look good today! Was she really a sadist in bed that you ended up like that? Uh. Tres, as always, was a moron. He could find every situation worthy of his disgusting, perverted side.

But as I was frustrated with his brother s appearance, Van obviously wasn t. Ang totoo, hindi siya sumagot sa pagbati ng kapatid niya. Hindi ko maintindihan kung natutuwa siya o hindi sa pagdating ng mga bisita namin. In normal days, I d never welcome visitors like them. But right now, I think I just have to take the deadly, black roses.

The Freniere Mafia is here. Detective Penber whispered in awe. I realized then that this was his dream come true. His killing two birds with one stone plan. Pero wala akong panahon na pag-isipan pa ang implikasyon ng mga pangarap ngayon ni Penber. There were more pressing issues. Our lives. Our safety.

Lumingon si Tres sa paligid na tila binibisita lang ang lugar. You didn t tell me there were a lot of hot girls here. I could have built my own rest house, right here in the middle of the school yard. Uh. What did you expect from Tres. I wish someone would just stop him. And as if to grant my wish, Algernon Freniere put his right hand on Tres s shoulder. Tres smirked at him but didn t attempt to say stupid things again.

Ibinaling ni Algernon Freniere ang paningin niya sa mukha ni Van at naglakad tungo sa amin. Tulad ni Van, hindi ko rin mabasa ang ekspresyon niya. All I knew was that he was so d mned serious. I guess, like father, like sons. Naramdaman ko ang pag-atras ng bahagya ng ilang miyembro ng Stones Organization. Principal Steins must have known that this was a deadly checkmate. But this wasn t your ordinary chess game. This was the kind of chess game where things didn t end on a simple checkmate. This was the game where the winner intended to wipe every single piece of the enemy on the board.

Ipagpaumanhin mo ang aming pagdalaw sa paaralan na iyong pinangangasiwaan, wika ni Algernon Freniere na pinatutungkulan si Principal Steins.

You can t fool me with words, Freniere! I can shoot you right now! Sagot nito na tila mas pinatapang pa siya dahil sa desperado niyang sitwasyon. In a way, it was comical. Napakalaki ng pagkakaiba nilang dalawa. Kalmado at tila walang inaalala si Algernon Freniere subalit sobrang desperado ni Principal Steins.

Hindi kita pipigilang gawin iyan. Subalit lubhang napakahalaga ng pakay ko sa dalawang batang ito, wika muli ni Algernon na tumigil sa mismong harap namin ni Van. This was a chess game where the king moved first. Tumigil ang paningin ni Algernon sa magkahawak na kamay namin ni Van at saka tumingin sa akin. Ipagpaumanhin mo ang kawalan ng ugaling

pagkamaginoo ng panganay kong anak, sabi niya. Van pulled me away from his father. Hindi ko na alam kung kanino niya ako pinoprotektahan. Van got his father s attention because of it and I froze as their eyes met.

Alam kong nalalaman mo kung bakit ako narito. Mas seryoso at nakakatakot ang tinig na ginamit nito kay Van. Even I had goosebumps because of fear. These people could really induce fear just by doing nothing. But I knew why he was here. He was here to save us, right?

She became my life that first time she walked into my world. Nang makita ko siyang nanghihina sa unang pagkakataon. I ve never felt the urge to live and protect someone from anything until that day, seryosong sagot ni Van. Whoah, wait! Was he talking about that Bloody Welcome party? But Ethan was the one who helped me then. Van just said he was sure I could handle it. So, hindi talaga ako ang sinabihan niya ng mga salitang iyon? Para kay Ethan talaga yun?

At isinusuko mo ngayon ang buhay mo sa Mafia Freniere? Nagtatagis ang mga bagang na tanong ni Algernon na tila ba naaapektuhan siya sa sagot ng isang Giovanni Freniere.

Tumango si Van. If that s what it takes to make her live, determinado nitong sagot. That was when I panicked. This conversation wasn t going in the right direction. There was something wrong.

Wait. What are you saying? Aren t you here to help us? Naguguluhang tanong ko. Seryoso akong tiningnan ni Algernon Freniere. I swear I could see my death in his gaze.

Iniligtas ka ng taong ito sa paraang hindi niya dapat ginawa, sagot niya na pinapatungkulan si Van na tila hindi niya ito anak. Mas tumindi ang kaba ko sa bawat segundong lumilipas.

What what do you mean? I didn t feel good about any of this. Even the students seemed to tense up. Sebastian and Old Max obviously were very nervous. Nananatili lang na hindi gumagalaw ang mga Mafia Reapers sa paligid. But I have a feeling that they were just waiting for their master to say anything and they will no doubt do it.

Ang sinumang magbanggit ng pangalan mula sa kwaderno lalo na ang kaisa-isang pangalan na nabura mula rito ay kailangang magbayad ng sarili niyang pangalan. Para iligtas ka, nagtaksil siya sa Freniere Mafia. Para iligtas ka, sinuway niya ang mga batas namin. Paliwanag ni Algernon. Pero hindi pa siya tapos. At ikaw bilang kaisa-isang taong nakapasok at nakalabas ng mansion nang walang pahintulot ay kailangan ring maparusahan. Subalit wag kang mag-alala. Ang buhay ng isang Giovanni Freniere ay sapat na upang dugtungan ang sa iyo, pormal at seryoso niyang dugtong.

Wala akong naging panahon para intindihin ang nararamdaman ko dahil kay Tres. Sandali! Sir Algernon! Wala ito sa usapan wika ni Tres at akmang lalapit sa kinaroroonan namin subalit sa isang saglit lang ay nasa harap na nito si Henrietta Arturia at tinutukan ito ng baril. Tres looked at her strangely, like he thought she was betraying him. And the amazing thing was I expected Tres to fight her. Especially since Henrietta was one woman compared to Old Max who was immediately surrounded by a number of reapers. But instead, he stood his ground, looking frustrated.

Algernon! Ikaw, higit sa lahat, ang lubos na dapat makaunawa ng rason ni Giovanni! Sigaw ni Old Max. Hindi siya kumilos dahil na rin sa dami ng Mafia reaper na pumalibot sa kaniya. Strangely, all these reapers looked solemn and full of respect even as they threaten with their guns to shoot him if he ever took a step forward.

Hindi siya pinansin ni Algernon at sa halip ay tinutukan ng baril si Van. Van closed his eyes. That was when I found myself stepping in between them to protect Van.

I won t let you! Gamit ang baril ni Catherine del Valle ay tinutok ko ito sa nakakatakot na si Algernon Freniere. Mukhang nakuha ng atensyon niya ang baril na hawak ko and I thought I saw a ghost of sadness that crossed his eyes. Everyone seemed to look shock at what I ve done. Even the reapers. I just pointed a gun to Algernon Freniere. I must be making history.

Alam mong hindi ka matutulungan ng baril na iyan. Bakit hindi mo subukan? Tanong niya.

Summer! What the hell are you doing?! Tila hindi rin makapaniwalang tanong ni Van. Hindi ko siya pinansin. Diretso lang akong nakatingin sa mata ni Algernon Freniere.

I m not going to kill you. Death won t heal your pain and sadness, matatag kong sabi na ikinabigla niya. You are the biggest idiotic person that I have ever met! You re a coward! You re afraid of the thought that the same thing that happened to you might happen to your sons if they fall for someone. You re afraid that they might feel the same pain and experience the same loss. You were obsessed of death and hated it at the same time that it became your god! I pity you! You think death is the only thing that comes next after misery? Uh! Enroll to some kindergarten school, Old Man, for you to understand the basics of Life!

Hindi ko alam kung saan ko nakukuha ang lakas at tapang ko sa pagsasalita ng ganitong bagay sa isang leader ng kinatatakutang mafia. For all I know, I should be passing out right now. But I couldn t. I couldn t accept the fact of Van s death. God! The mere idea was making me insane right now.

Subalit ang baril ay nilikha upang pumaslang, mahina ang boses na wika ni Algernon. Tila mas sinasabi niya ito sa kaniyang sarili kaysa sa akin. I suddenly understood why he was like this. Sinabi sa akin ni Tres noon. They had forgotten what love was. And Algernon Freniere should be pitied because he was losing so much in his life because of his unending grief. But then who wouldn t be? Much like Van, Algernon had lost so much. His wife, his trusted reaper and a son. And now he was forced to eliminate another son.

Catherine del Valle taught me something through this gun. Its main purpose wasn t to kill. It was to protect someone who was important to you. This time, I got his full attention. Subalit bago pa man siya makahuma ay naramdaman ko ang paglipad ko sa ere at pagbagsak sa lupa. Isang mafia reaper na hindi ko kilala at halos ka-edad ko lang ang nasa harapan ko ngayon. Pinilit kong tumayo at tumakbo pabalik sa kinaroroonan ni Van dahil nakatutok pa rin rito ang baril ni Algernon Freniere. But the Mafia Reaper caught my arms and held me. Why were they so heartless? I was crying again. No! I wouldn t let them kill Van! Not after everything we ve been through!

A-are you sure you want to die for me? Tanong ko na ang pinatutungkulan ay si Van.

Our eyes locked. For you, I will, malungkot niyang sagot. And it angered me. It brought me terrible pain at the same time. How could he decide to give up just like that? Tumayo ako ng tuwid at direktang hinarap ang reaper na may hawak sa akin.

Kill me, seryoso kong sabi.

What? Summer! No! Desperadong tutol ni Van. Isinabunot niya ang daliri sa buhok niya dahil sa frustration. Masama ko siyang tiningnan.

Do you know how it feels to be left behind by the one you cared the most? If you live, I live! If you die, I die! Nagmamatigas kong sabi. Death was a horrible option. I silently wished that he choose to live. Please, let s live.

Bagsak ang mga balikat na tumingin si Van kay Algernon Freniere. It was like he was going out of choices and was going to choose the last, pathetic way.

Father He begged. Hindi ko alam kung ilang beses na siyang nagmamakaawa para sa akin. Sunud-sunod na luha ang dumaloy sa pisngi ko nang magbago ang ekspresyon ni Algernon Freniere. Isa pang tinig ang dumagdag sa makapigil hiningang sitwasyon.

Father please! I don t want to lose a brother not again Malungkot na paki-usap ni Tres. And that was when I saw a tear drop from Algernon s eye. It was too quick for anyone else to notice. Pinakawalan ako ng Mafia Reaper kasabay ng pagbaba ni Algernon ng baril niya. We made it, right? It caused tears and painful realization but I guess we made it. Almost everyone felt relieved.

Ngumiti sa akin si Van. It was the genuine smile of his and it made me run to his direction. But I guess some stories were simply complicated to have a happy ending. It was like we could fight all we want and with all our best but still, it was not going to change how everything will end. Maybe the world really was unfair. I was almost there. I could almost touch his smiling

face. I could almost whisper the words that I ve been wanting to tell him. I was also hoping that he would say the same thing, too.

But one gunshot turned everything into a blurry, deafening darkness.

It happened as if in slow motion: I was running, everyone caught their breath in shock and that once in a lifetime blue moon smile was slowly fading from Van s face as he falls to the ground. And just like a bomb, everything exploded at the same time, giving me a swirl of emotions: grief, sadness, pain, loss all in the darkest shades.

Take a big fish down before the game ends, narinig kong wika ni Principal Steins at saka tumakbo papasok ng building. All these time, they were watching the Freniere drama. And all these while, they were waiting for a chance to strike. D mn it!

Nakatayo lang si Algernon Freniere at tila hindi matanggap ang nangyari. He decided to spare his son and yet fate still took him away from him.

Van! I rushed to Van s side and tried to cover his bleeding chest with my hand. But it won t stop! The blood just won t f cking stop! Why the hell won t it stop?! Please, don t, umiiyak kong wika. Sebastian had rushed to our side.

Hell, no! Giovanni! F ck! This can t be happening! Frustrated niyang sigaw. He was crying. Frenieres were humans, too.

Hold on, Van. We re taking you to the hospital Itinaas ni Van ang isa niyang kamay at inilagay sa pisngi ko.

Words are n-not enough. Time is not enough.. Please even without those those things I hope you know how I feel for you Nahihirapan niyang sabi. Wala akong magawa kundi tumango at maki-usap.

Just don t leave me, Van. Not now I can t I saw my tears fall down his face. Even tears were not enough for my pain because of this. It was like my heart was breaking and being ripped out from my chest. It was intolerable! The pain and exhaustion were blurring my eyes but not

numbing my grief. Why him? Why me? Why us? Why now when everything was about to be alright?

Live, Summer. For me. He said and his hand dropped from my face as his eyes closed.

Hindi ko na mapakinggan ang sarili ko. I could see my surroundings but I couldn t process it. I could hear everyone but not my own voice or scream or continuous begging. Just before I finally passed out, I heard Algernon s voice.

Get them All of them. But don t kill them just yet. I watched as the Mafia reapers ran after the stones inside the building, followed by the students. Even Detective Penber was with them.

I guess this was it. Darkness comes after the end. But if ever someone out there was listening, I hope He hears me. I hope He hears my loud weeping. Please. If I could just have a different ending.

EPILOGUE

The first time I entered Montello high, I had been wanting and waiting to get out of this school. It gave me a story which a normal teenager wouldn t experience in her boring life. Well, I don t do normal and I was so impatient with boredom. And so it showed me something dangerously dark and complicated to the point that I even wanted to escape from it. But I couldn t escape from the deadly rose, right? Apparently, my father could. It was just that I was not as awesome as him.

This holy ground was too quiet. But this was how it was supposed to be. It should be quiet. Ipinikit ko ang mga mata ko kasabay ng paghinga ng malalim. Masakit pa rin sa damdamin at sobrang bigat sa kalooban tuwing maaalala ko ang mga nangyari. Subalit gaano man kasakit ang mga ala-ala, hindi ko maitatangging binuo nito ang mas matibay na ako. Ako siguro ang isa sa mga taong hindi makakalimot. Tahimik kong inilagay ang puting rosas at saka sinindihan ang kandila. Ilang buwan na rin ang nakalipas mula nang mawala siya. Ginawa ng taong ito ang makakaya niya upang mailigas ako kami ang Montello High.

A wonderful person, narinig kong sabi ng tinig mula sa aking likuran.

And will never be forgotten, sang-ayon ko sa sinabi niya. Dad put a hand on my shoulder while staring at the grave. I could clearly see sadness in his eyes and at the same time, gratitude for everything that this person had done.

Dad, she said you were the most brilliant man she s ever met, nakangiti kong sabi. He smiled back at me. My serious and formal Dad absolutely knows everything.

There are love we don t deserve but still, we re thankful for it. Alam kong alam niya iyon kung kaya t she let me go. She knew that I love your mother and she let me have that love. No, she will never be a martyr to me. It was just that her love was unconditional and pure. No negative words could ever taint it, wika niya and for a moment, I think I saw something glisten in his eyes.

She told me to make a better story. Well, that means she got a good one. And I will. I will make sure that I will have a better story. Dad gave me a proud smile and hugged me. I returned his embrace. Oh, a father s embrace is the safest place in the world.

Thank you for sending me to Montello High, dagdag ko at mahina siyang tumawa.

Well, since you mentioned Montello High, I think that graduation ceremony already started. We don t want to miss it, do we? Aniya at saka ako sumimangot. Gusto lang niyang umakyat sa magarang entablado ng Montello High like most dads do.

Dad, I m not one of the graduating students! Protesta ko habang iginigiya niya ako sa kotse. Autumn and Mama were already at the school. My mom had heard about everything that happened and accepted it without judgment. She was even thankful for Dr. Charlotte Mitton for letting my Dad go and saving her hard-headed daughter. Mama thought she owed Charlotte a lot. She was really sensible.

Ha! I know! Hindi mo ako magiging ama kung hindi ko alam na sa isang taon ka pa magtatapos. But sweetie, you re one of the Powerful Ten! Kailangan nating umattend sa awarding mo! I can t miss that! And there he goes again with the powerful Ten. He had been talking about this for days now. Tila nga nabale-wala ang pagiging rank 1 ni Autumn sa buong department nila. And I didn t see any envy from my sister. She was simply just so proud of me. Well, my whole family was, actually. They were acting like I just received some phenomenal award. If only they knew what I had to go through just to get that position.

Marami nang tao sa school at mukhang kanina pa nagsisimula ang Graduation Ceremony. Who would have thought that this school could have perished if it wasn t for the Freniere and the students?

Matapos ang insidente noong nakaraang Disyembre ay pinauwi ang lahat ng mga estudyante ng Montello High sa kani-kanilang mga tahanan upang ipagdiwang ang pasko. Apparently, Principal Steins at ang iba pa niyang kasabwat ay nagbigay ng abiso sa mga pamilya ng mga estudyante na mae-extend lang ang klase kung kaya t halos walang nagtataka na magpapasko na ay nasa loob pa rin kaming lahat ng Montello High.

Ipinasara ang eskwelahan and the Freniere Mafia bought it to be one of their territories. Gumawa din ng cover-up na kwento ang mafia para hindi lumabas ang totoo nilang kaugnayan sa insidente. Ang alam ng buong mundo, nagsara ang Montello high dahil sa nalugi na ito. Everyone was shipped to other schools. I was also supposed to go back to Arturia. But after the holiday vacation, nang magbalik ang klase ay nakita namin ang mga sarili naming pumapasok sa Montello High sa halip na sa mga bago naming eskwelahan. It was like an instinct. Montello High was the place where we belong and we didn t want to leave. Even the teachers didn t want to.

Oh, God, Summer! When are you ever going to be on time?! Tanong ni Jamie nang makita kami.

Hello, Tito Samuel! We re just going to uhm kidnap Summer, wika ni Mirden at ipinulupot ang braso niya sa braso ko.

Ngumiti si Daddy. Kidnap is a strong word. But since you asked for permission, then go. I just hope it doesn t include any ransom money, pagpayag niya. Iyon lang ang hinintay nila Mirden at Jamie at tinangay ako tungo sa mga estudyanteng nakaupo sa harap ng malaking stage. I didn t know how they managed to set this up but the venue was incredible. Umupo kami sa mga panghuling mga hilera ng upuan na nakahiwalay sa grupo ng mga estudyante sa bandang unahan. The chairs for the graduating students was supposed to be arranged alphabetically but instead, it was divided into two groups. The one side is for the graduating Black Government members and the other side was for the graduating Dark Monarch members. Those students who didn t have any affiliation can sit wherever side they want.

That Martinia will graduate without taking responsibility for taking advantage of me while I was weak! Wika ng boses kasabay ng naramdaman kong pag-upo ni Makki sa tabi ko. Like me, he was also not one of the graduating students. Napailing na lang ako. He still couldn t forget about that. Natahimik ang lahat nang tawagin ni Sir Daniel Flores ang Valedictorian ng mga graduating students. Yes. Our English teacher was now the school manager after it re-opened.

Umakyat si Zach Martinia sa gitna ng entablado. He s really hot, narinig kong bulong ni Jamie. I rolled my eyes at her. She was still obviously pining for him. Sa dami ng pinagdaanan nila, it was a wonder why Jamie didn t took advantage of it. We all waited for Zach to speak. I wondered what he was going to say.

First, this graduation speech is not for you, panimula niya at napuno ang paligid ng samu t saring reaksyon. So please, someone explain to me why Jamie and half of the girls present here were drooling over this arrogant dictator in graduation gown, cap and all. Mukhang napansin rin niya ang mga reaksyon sa una niyang linya kaya nagpatuloy siyang magsalita.

Dude, if you want something to encourage you, then don t just sit there and listen like I m going to preach the Holy Bible because I won t. Just fly yourself to the best University and take the course or field that you love. You don t need to be told on which steps to take! It s your own decisions that will matter! And I know you can make it. You graduated from here,

after all, so why bother? Wika ni Zach in an irritated voice. Uh. This was so Zach Martinia. But everyone was hanging on to his every word. They were absorbing everything he was saying even though he was so sarcastic. Because he was telling the truth.

Well, yeah. I m not going to spend sleepless nights preparing a speech just for you. It s for the memories. It s for those who weren t here anymore. It s for those who had seen everything from the beginning. It s for the stories we ve made. It s for the pain and the loss. It s for the hope and victory. It s for Montello High. Silence. I was holding my breath. I think everyone was. All the emotions came back as he said that and I knew I gritted my teeth as my eyes started to sting.

We all got unique and awesome characteristics in a weird way. We re all different and alone. But we belong together in this place: this school. That recent, miserable depression that we experienced a few months ago, I know, got a terrible impact on you. And I was also scared back then. I was terribly scared He paused, as if admitting to himself silently that he was scared.
Hindi ko inaasahan na makakaramdam ako ng ganung uri ng takot. Natatakot ako sa bawat oras na lumipas. Natatakot ako sa bawat sandaling nagtatama ang mga mata natin. Natatakot ako sa maaaring mangyari. Natatakot ako na ang lahat ng relasyon at pagkakaibigang binuo natin sa paaralang ito ay tuluyang lamunin ng dilim. Natatakot ako para sa atin.

I was sure everyone can relate to Zach now. Because I was pretty sure everyone was also afraid that time.

Fear was our strongest emotion back then. So we used it. We used it to stand. We used that freaking fear for our plans. We used fear to fight back. We used our fear to save our lives. The memory of the scene where they all ran from the cafeteria to the Nightwoods to escape came back to me.

I really thought that fear was our strongest emotion. But I realized I was wrong. Because there comes this immense emotion that changed everything. Love. It s our love for this place that freed the cage from our hearts. We used Love to save someone. We used Love to save not just ourselves but everyone. We used Love to save Montello High. I remembered running back from the Nightwoods. I heard a sniff from my

side and I saw Jamie and Mirden wiping tears from their eyes. Uh! Yeah, right, Zach. These words were not for them. And I didn t really want to see teary eyes. They were contagious.

And then there goes the loss. For those of you who felt her caring hand of her last day, you were just so lucky Napatigil si Zach sa pagsasalita at saka tumingala at pumikit. Ilang segundo siyang nanatili sa ganung posisyon at nang muli niyang ibalik ang paningin niya sa unahan, I was sure he was holding back his tears.

Can we just keep the memories? Tanong niya sa garalgal na boses. I felt my own tears dampened my cheeks. That question wasn t part of his speech. He was asking us to keep everything in our hearts. I know that it was painful and sad and tragic. It even broke your hearts and probably some bones. It was probably something you didn t want to go back to. They were dark and cold but there are memories that shouldn t be forgotten, right? Pagpapatuloy niya. Maliwanag na naapektuhan ang lahat sa kaniyang paki-usap. Maski si Sir Flores ay seryosong napapatangu-tango.

These words are for the memories. And as we walk out of this school, I hope that you ll bring it with you. I hope you won t forget. I hope you learn from it. I hope you keep our memories. A tear fell from his eyes. It takes a man to cry in front of many people. Now I know why Jamie was drooling after him. Sa gitna ng katahimikan ay tumayo ako sa aking upuan at malakas na nagsalita.

I ll keep it.

Zach looked at my direction. Everyone looked at me. Pinahid ko ang luha ko at saka muling sinabing, I ll keep it. I thought they will still keep their attention on me but a man from the graduating students stood up as well and said, I ll keep it. I smiled at him. He still looked playfully at me. I broke this man s heart but he said he will keep the memories. He was a good guy.

I ll keep it, too. Makki stood up, followed by Jamie and Mirden saying the same thing. I ll keep it. It filled the silence. It filled the whole Montello High. I guess we were all keepers here. Mukhang nakuha na ni

Zach ang sagot na nais niya kung kaya t bumaba siya sa entablado at bumalik sa kinauupuan. Halos lumipas din ang ilang minuto bago namin narinig ang huling, I ll keep it.

Matapos ito ay tinawag na ang Powerful 10. Nagsimula sa pinakahuling posisyon hanggang sa pinaka-una. When they called the fifth powerful student, some girls cheered on him. I watched as Jin Cast walked up the stage with his father. They shook hands with Sir Flores and Jin remained there as his father left the stage.

I will take my position back this coming school year, nakangiting sabi ni Makki sa akin nang tawagin ang pangalan niya. Umakyat siya ng entablado kasama rin ang kaniyang ama at pumuwesto sa tabi ni Jin.

Third powerful student Ms. Summer Leondale. My father was already beside me and we walked together to the front. Crap. You d think this wouldn t make me nervous but it did. Autumn was getting her DLSR ready. My proud Dad walked me to the stage at iniwan ako sa tabi ni Makki. To my surprise, Jin tried to stand between me and Makki.

Dude! This isn t the line for the relief goods! Reklamo ni Makki subalit pumayag namang makipagpalit ng pwesto kay Jin.

Sorry, Dude! I thought it was your graduation gift to me, sagot ni Jin and we both laughed. God, these guys! Didn t they notice that we were on the stage?

Happy graduation! Congrats! Mahina kong bati kay Jin and hugged him.

Thank you. Dadalawin pa rin kita rito when I get to College. Teka, where is your stupid boyfriend? Tanong niya. Jeez! He s really fond of the word boyfriend.

Jin, he s not my boyfriend! Protesta ko subalit hindi na siya muling nagsalita dahil tinawag na rin ang pangalan ni Zach bilang ikalawang pinakamalakas.

Stop making a scene at the center of the stage, wika ni Zach. Mapang-asar lang siyang nginitian ni Jin.

Inabot sa amin ng ilang mga guro ang isang emblem bilang parangal sa titulong nakamit namin. I stared at the emblem. It had the logo of Montello High school and on the side, there was a tiny black rose engraved. What s with the Black Rose?

And the most powerful student, Giovanni Freniere, tawag ni Sir Flores sa pangalan ng taong iyon. Walang kumilos upang umakyat ng stage. Inilibot ko ang mata ko sa paligid upang hanapin siya subalit ni anino niya ay wala. Mukhang hindi siya dadalo.

Tsk. I told him that if he left you alone, I would spirit you away, nakangiting wika ni Jin. He still hadn t changed after everything. I thought I lost him. Good thing na katulad ng ibang estudyante ay antidote din ang nailagay sa kaniya. I guess I was still lucky.

Just when Sir Flores was giving up waiting for Van and was about to say something, a speeding Bugatti Veyron rushed towards our direction from the gate. It went through the gap between the seated graduating students and stopped right in front of the stage. We all looked at the stunt with open mouth. What s up with this stunt? Lumabas ng kotse ang tila iritableng si Van. He was still as gorgeous as ever and as evil as ever, too, because he glared at me and Jin.

I told you! I will drive! Since when are you going to listen to your older brother? Older brothers always get the driver seat! It s an absolute rule between siblings! Malakas na reklamo ni Tres habang kasunod na lumabas ni Van ng kotse. Hindi siya pinansin ni Van at sa halip ay umakyat ng entablado at pumuwesto sa pagitan namin ni Zach. Uh. He wasn t supposed to do that. That made Zach in the first place. These guys were creating disorder at the stage!

You re not going to be lucky, Cast, sabi niya kay Jin at saka hinawakan ang kamay ko. I didn t protest. I was simply so happy to have him by my side. The gun shot from that incident almost tore him away from me. Good

thing it didn t hit any vital spot. He was able to make it back to me. And I really thank God for hearing my prayers then.

Umakyat si Tres sa entablado na siyang ikinabigla naming lahat maliban kay Van na mukhang inaasahan nang ganito ang gagawin ng kaniyang kuya. Tila ngayon lang din nakahuma si Sir Flores sa nasaksihan sapagkat saka lang niya natagpuan ang sariling boses nang humarap sa kaniya si Sebastian Freniere.

And to give the emblem to the most powerful student, we have here our new school Administrator, Mr. Sebastian Freniere. Tila lalong nagpamangha sa lahat ang sinabi ni Sir Flores. What? What did he say? Sebastian Freniere is the new Montello high administrator? Was he freaking kidding me?! Was this some kind of a sick joke? Bago pa kami makabawi sa anunsyong iyon ay inagaw na ni Tres ang mikropono mula kay Sir Flores.

Your violent reactions are pretty much welcome. But I already bought this school and it is now my territory. Let s just be kind and professional with it. Thank you, nakangiting wika ni Tres, as if to charm everyone with his oh, so gorgeous and devilish smile. I couldn t help but frown at that.

Oh It s really lucky! It feels good to finally finish high school and graduate! Narinig kong bulong ni Jin. Yeah, right. Samantalang ako, may matitira pang isang school year at si Tres ang school admin! Ibinaling ko ang paningin sa kapatid ng bagong may-ari ng Montello High. He looked back at me and smirked.

Well, I m not leaving. So all you have to do is stay with me and you ll be safe, wika niya. Hindi ko maiwasang mapangiti. Everything would be great from now on.

Nagsimulang tumugtog ang graduation song and all the graduation students started singing Parting Glass nang isa-isa kaming bumaba sa entablado. Van didn t let go of my hands and I bet he wouldn t anytime soon.

And all I ve done for want of wit,

To memory now I can t recall

So fill to me the parting glass

Good night and joy be with you all

I saw my Dad, Mom and Autumn at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for us. I was about to tell them something subalit naunahan ako ni Van sa pagsasalita.

Can I please Okay, he said, please. Can I please take her with me for a moment? Seryoso at sinserong tanong ni Van. Teka, ipinagpapaalam ba niya ako sa mga magulang ko? Hindi muna sumagot si Dad. Instead, they got into an intense and awkward eye-to-eye, as if they were having an imaginary battle.

Be sure that you bring my girl home unscathed, sa wakas ay sagot ni Daddy.

Sure thing, Sir, sagot ni Van at iginiya ako patungo sa sasakyan. It was funny when a girl would have no say when her Dad approved the thing a guy asked for.

But since it falls unto my Lord,

That I should rise and you should not

I ll gently rise and I ll softly call

Goodnight and joy, be with you all

Bago kami tuluyang makaabot sa kotse ay lumapit sa amin si Detective Penber. I had been meeting with him these past months. Nang araw nung insidente ay nagpunta siya sa Montello kahit na nasa trabaho pa siya ng mga oras na iyon. At dahil pinagtakpan ng Mafia ang totoong nangyari ng araw na iyon, hindi mapatunayan na hindi sumuway sa responsibilidad si Detective Penber. Ilang linggo rin siyang sinuspinde mula sa trabaho pero ngayon ay nakabalik na rin siya.

Si Penber din ang nagkwento sa akin ng mga nangyari matapos akong mawalan ng malay. Apparently, Algernon Freniere and the Mafia reapers played with the members of the Stones Organization. Binigyan nila ang mga ito ng tatlumpung segundo para makatakbo palayo sa mafia o makapagtago bago sila tuluyang hi-nunt isa-isa ng mga reaper. Nobody was killed as far as I was concerned. Kinuha lang sila at hinuli. The thing was, not everyone was taken. May mga ilang nakatakas. Kasama na si Ephraim Novou.

Henrietta was the one who found Principal Steins at bilang bahagi ng cover-up ng mafia ay ibinigay niya ang kustodiya kay Detective Penber. Hindi man mapatunayang hinostage kami ng sarili naming principal sa loob ng sarili naming eskwelahan, napatunayan naman ang ilan pang illegal na pagkakasangkot ni Steins sa ilan pang krimen.

He s now in maximum security. But he s not talking. He s keeping mum about his crimes, paliwanag ni Penber. There was still one thing we asked him for, as a favor.

Congrats, Summer Van As a grandiose gesture, nag-abot pa siya ng bulaklak sa akin. What the hell?

Is there news? Agad kong tanong.

I m sorry. There is still nothing we can find about him, seryoso niyang sagot. Van stiffened ever so slightly. Kabilang si Ethan sa mga taong hindi namin mahanap matapos ang insidente. That was what I asked Detective Penber as a favor for. Bukod sa mga regular niyang trabaho ay tumutulong din siya sa paghahanap kay Ethan. But we re still not stopping. We will find him.

To my surprise, Van talked. Thank you. I knew what he was thinking. Ethan was a traitor but he was still his friend.

Umalis din agad si Detective Penber and I slipped into the car when Van opened it for me. I waited for him to climb to the Driver s seat. Pareho kaming walang imik habang umaandar ang kotse papalabas ng school. The thing was, I still haven t told him what I wanted to tell him back then. Nang

makalabas siya ng hospital, we fell into this pseudo-relationship. Walang label. That was why I told Jin he wasn t my boyfriend. Will he say the same thing to me, too?

What are you thinking, Summer? Tanong niya habang nagmamaneho.

I swallowed my anxieties. Uhm where are we going? Tanong ko.

He just smirked and eyed me playfully. Somewhere far from here Sagot niya.

Muli akong natahimik. Should I ask him now? Okay, maybe I should

Hey, jerk. When are you going to say the words? Tanong ko. Nagtatanong din ang ibinigay niyang tingin sa akin. Well, I should hear it from him first, right?

Words? Tanong niya.

Well words About this About Us. I looked at his eyes and realized that maybe I didn t need those words anymore. I really liked words but just by looking at him, just by being by his side those were enough.

To my surprise, he stopped the car in the middle of the highway and turned to look at me seriously. He was so d mn serious that it made my heart beat even faster.

Well if you really Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko because he suddenly pulled me closer to him, grabbed the side of my face and gently shut me up with his lips. This kiss. It was still as sweet as ever. And I think everything that we had to go through to get to this point was worth it.

He stared straight at me when we broke the kiss. It was so sincere, I feel like drowning in it. I just couldn t find the right words. It s love and yet, simply saying love is just a word and sound. Saying it is not enough. You could give me a thick research paper about love and yet, I would still say that it must be more than those words. I hope you feel it, too.

He melt my heart with those words. How can mere words melt the ice around my heart like that? Maybe love wasn t just a word. Maybe it was defined and unreasonable. But that s what it is, right? You don t need words. You don t need reasons.

I smiled on the road as he started the engine again. Wherever we were going, however everything will end, I will still trust him. I was so glad that I d made the best decision of taking my d mn one shot of a lifetime. It was really worth it.

I knew that there will come a time when everything would meet its own end. Maybe no one will remember we were even here. No one will remember we even existed. Maybe our stories will fade in those yellowed pages. Maybe we will be forgotten. There would be no trace of us. Time will erase us. But I hope that somehow, someone out there will remember us. Someone knows us. Some who completely knows our story, how it began and how it will end. And I hope that person will keep us. I hope that person will find a place in their hearts to keep our memories.

Good night and joy, be with you all.

The End

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